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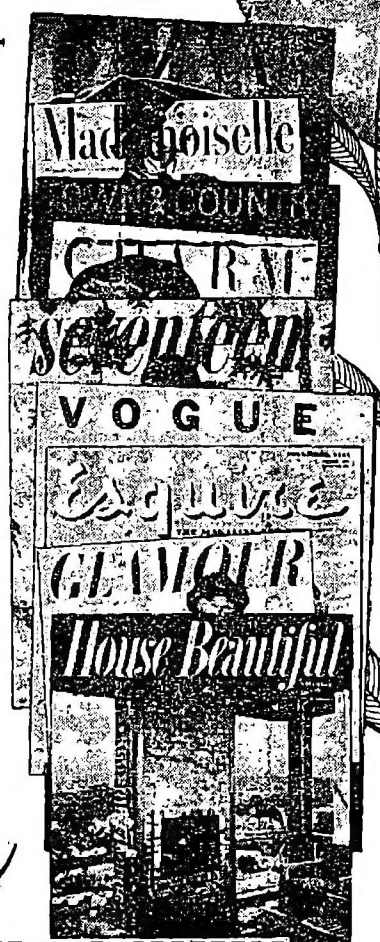

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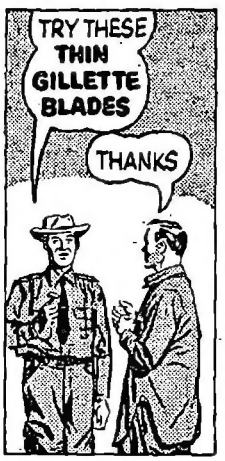

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FANTASTIC NOVELS MAGAZINE

APRIL, 1952

MARY GNAEDINGER, *Editor*

VOL. 13 NO. 3

Full Length Feature

THE DEATH MAKER — **Austin J. Small** — **16**

One man alone held the power to wipe out a great city in one night, to obliterate an entire nation in seven short days. And he meant to do just that, secure in the knowledge that there was no possible defense against his dread weapon that would soon make him the mad master of all human destiny!

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Short Story

THE NEW SUN — **J. S. Fletcher** — **96**

The blazing holocaust hurled itself earthward, while mankind cowered, trembling, in whatever dark burrows they could find.

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Features

THE READERS' VIEWPOINT — **6**

IN THE NEXT ISSUE — **95**

THE NEXT ISSUE
WILL BE ON SALE MARCH 19.

Cover by Lawrence. Inside Illustrations by Lawrence and Finlay

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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THE READERS' VIEWPOINT

Address comments to the Letter Editor, Famous Fantastic Mysteries, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

FOR THE FUTURE

Dear Readers:

There seems to be a little anxiety because of a recent letter of mine which mentioned that I would be on the lookout for good science-fiction short stories for *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*. Some of the readers wish this magazine to stick to fantasy, pure fantasy, and make no departures. To these I wish to say that we have always been a fantasy book and always shall be, but there are some stories which verge on science and still remain "fantastic"—especially those which deal with space travel. It seems to me that a few of these would be acceptable to us.

The enthusiastic letters about "The Gray Mahatma" by Talbot Mundy included a number of requests for more of Mundy's stories. There are not many of them as truly fantastic as this one, but any which answer to this description, rather than to that of "adventure" could be published in this magazine.

"The New Sun" by J. S. Fletcher in this issue is from *Argosy*, 1923.

One of the most interesting letters to come in recently is the first one in this department from Jim Fleming, who is an admirer of Gilbert Collins, author of "The Starkenden Quest," which appeared in this magazine, and "The Valley of Eyes Unseen," which preceded this present issue on the newsstands. Anyone who wishes to write Mr. Fleming for further information on Mr. Collins and his books should send a stamped self-addressed envelope for a reply from him. Letters to Mr. Collins can be published in the Viewpoints or forwarded to Mr. Collins in England if they include a stamped envelope inside.

"Fantastically" yours,
Mary Gnaedinger.

Dear Mary Gnaedinger,

I have just received a letter from Gilbert Collins! This letter came as a result of the inquiry I sent to Heinemanns, the publisher of his last novel "The Newest Swimming." As you will be interested in what he says, I shall proceed to reproduce most of it here:

Dear Mr. Fleming,

My agent sent me your letter of July 3 which had been passed to him by Heinemanns, the publishers. I don't know why you want information about me, but have no objection to answering your questions.

What few copies of my books I still have are—owing to the housing shortage, which is still acute in England—with my furniture in a warehouse in Torquay, a south coast watering-place about two hundred miles from here.

(There follows a list.)

As to your inquiries:

Born May 2nd, 1890, in Southampton, England, and educated there in a school founded in 1653. 1907-1916: in the English Civil Service. 1916-1919: in the British Army in world War No. 1. 1919-1922: in the British Consular Service, China. 1922 onwards: Literature and Journalism and European travel.

Some time ago I joined a firm in the West End of London, and as I spend five days of the week at the office, I do not find much time for writing now. Some day, no doubt, I shall again devote all my time to literary pursuits.

One thing that pleased me about your letter was the very tasteful picture of a rose on the notepaper. The allusion I take it, is a Biblical one: The Rose of Sharon?

Yours truly,
Gilbert Collins.

I hope all the fans will write Mr. Collins and tell how they enjoy his works. Miss Gnaedinger informs me that these letters will appear in F.F.M. after "The Valley of Eyes Unseen" is published. This should gain him some new fans as well as those who enjoyed "Starkenden Quest." Let's all write him a big welcome to F.F.M. and show him there is a good reason in answer to his question, "Why should anyone want to know about me?"

JIM FLEMING.
Box 173,
Sharon, Kansas.

(Continued on page 8)

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"Have my own shop. Am authorized serviceman for five manufacturers and do servicing for 7 dealers."—P. MILLER, Maumee, O.

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Mail me FREE Lesson and 64-page book. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

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(Continued from page 6)

DISCUSSING DECEMBER ISSUE

The good old F.F.M. is back, hooray, hooray! It's refreshing to get back to normal with all the old favorites and several new ones—for company. The December issue is a prime example of F.F.M. at its best, even more so than the October issue which heralded the return to the larger format.

A Talbot Mundy story is always a good way to attract readers' attention, and "The Gray Mahatma" fully lived up to the promise of the forecast, and to the standard of the beautiful cover and interiors. Since you have printed this one novel of King and Yasmini, readers might like to read its predecessor, "King—of the Khyber Rifles," allusions to which were made in the present story. The earlier novel tells of King's first meeting with Yasmini in the magic mountain caves beyond the Khyber Pass, and is in my opinion one of Mundy's best novels.

Yasmini herself has been the subject of several other novels (non-fantasy) which are very [illegible] "The Guns of the Gods" tells of her early adventures, and "The Winds of the World" chronicles her schemes to help India rise to supremacy over the West, and more especially, to give women some power in Indian politics.

The Nine Unknown, who are referred to in "The Gray Mahatma" as the council from whom that agent took his orders, are the subject of still another novel to which they give their name as a title.

King and Ramsden have both been featured in others of Mundy's novels, most especially those dealing with Jimgrim & Co. From this, it can be seen that there is an intertwining of characters and situations in a great number of books. I think that Mundy has vastly increased the effectiveness and enjoyment value of his books by this procedure. After one has read a few of the books, one often comes across references to people or events with which he is already familiar through other books, and a feeling of greater acquaintance with the characters, and hence of increased interest in them and their problems is created.

In this respect, as in several others, there is a considerable resemblance between Mundy's stories and those of Sax Rohmer. Rohmer also intertwines characters and events in a number of books, tying several of his series together and making for increased enjoyment of all the stories. And, like Mundy, he often has for the central theme of his novels the idea of the resurgence of the East to power over Western civilization, although China, rather than India, is usually the rising power in his books.

Mundy is also a very good poet, and he often includes snatches of verses as chapter headings or within the text of the story itself. The song on page 19 of the present story is not entirely a true example of that facet of Mundy's talent.

I hope you have many more stories by Margaret Irwin coming up. The two you have printed so far are proof positive that she is a master of the art of evoking shudders through words. "The Book" generated an eery atmosphere that would have done credit to all the previous masters in the field. I am sure that Margaret Irwin will soon be numbered prominently among them.

The Lovecraft short was usual for him—that is, superb. Herewith the plea for some of his more scarce tales is repeated. When cometh "The Strange High House in the Mist," "The White Ship," and "The Quest of Iranon"?

All the illustrations in this issue were of very high quality, but the Bok for "Pickman's Model" takes the prize as about the most arresting and shuddersome of any illo I've ever seen in F.F.M. It fits perfectly the description of macabre art given by Lovecraft himself in the story. It really possesses the "anatomy of the terrible and the physiology of fear." If Lovecraft were alive today to see that illustration, I am sure he would change the title of the story to "Bok's Model."

Having printed one Rohmer novel and one short story, you should not stop now. There are countless masterpieces of terror, beauty, and horror waiting to be plucked from the pages of Rohmer's books. In the short story department I would recommend "The Hand of the White Sheekh," "Light of Atlantis," and "Curse of a Thousand Kisses." In the novel category, how about "The Green Eyes of Bast" or "The Bat Flies Low," both of which are good fantasies which would be even better in F.F.M. with a Lawrence cover and several Finlay interiors?

May I take a bit of space for a personal note? I may? Thank you. If there are any science-fiction and/or fantasy fans living around Evanston or Wilmette who would like to contact me, I would be glad to hear from any and all. Any fellow student at Northwestern is especially invited to write or look me up in person.

Mr. Nickerson had a very interesting letter in the Readers' Viewpoint. The information about Jules Verne was very welcome. One thing in the letter I quarrel with, however; why should there be more science and less fantasy in F.F.M.? There are over a dozen magazines devoted entirely to science fiction, while F.F.M. is the last ditch (no reflection intended!) stronghold of fantasy in the entire magazine field. I am discounting the couple of mags that print a special brand of juvenile pap and call it fantasy. Now that F.N. and A.M.F. are no longer printed, there should be an even greater concentration of fantasy in F.F.M.—let the magazine live up to its title!

As, let me add hastily, it always has, and I hope it always will.

ROBERT E. BRINEY.

1022 Greenwood Ave.,
Wilmette, Ill.

MUNDY'S STORY REWARDING

It is only lately that I have become an ardent fan of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries,* although I have purchased issues off and on for many years. I bought my first copy when I was about ten. Now, having theoretically gained more spare time for reading—some real time and increased reading speed equaling more time—as well, I hope, as a shade more maturity, I read all the stories in F.F.M. and enjoy them immensely. (By the way, I have been reading F.F.M. for eight years. If you're mathematically inclined, you can achieve the fascinating knowledge of my age.)

(Continued on page 10)

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Hospital Department R-65, Omaha 2, Nebraska

(Continued from page 8)

In the current November issue, I found Talbot Mundy's "The Gray Mahatma" very rewarding in entertainment, information, and ideas, as I do most or at least much fantasy and science fiction. In my opinion, this story could be either or both, depending entirely on the viewpoint of the reader.

I believe I read somewhere that Mundy was a friend and student of Rudyard Kipling. It may have been another author or the information may have been false. In any case, this novel is reminiscent of Kipling in some ways. It also reminds me for some reason of Doyle, and in the characterization, of Merritt. Needless to say, Mundy was a master storyteller.

The ending suggests that the author had a sequel in mind. If it was ever written, please obtain and publish it.

F.F.M.'s novelette this time "—And He Built a Crooked House—" was typical Heinlein, which means very good. I enjoyed rereading it.

The short stories this time were all good without any being really outstanding—even the Lovecraft. Of course, I believe his many imitators through the years have spoiled the effect for the modern reader.

I am not qualified to judge the merits of the poem, but I found it quite pleasant.

And may I say I enjoy the letters and the artwork fully as much as the stories. I would like to see more of both. They are two of the reasons I prefer the old, present format to the recent experimental one.

JIM HARMON.

427 East 8th St.
Mt. Carmel,
Illinois.

AUTHOR-TITLE INDEX

Donald B. Day, former editor of one of "The Fanscient", is preparing a complete author-title index of all professional American science-fiction magazines from 1926 to 1950, to include over 30,000 entries plus a complete authoritative index to pseudonyms. This book, which should be an indispensable tool to collectors, will appear in late spring of 1952 in a limited edition of 2,000 copies at $6.50. Advance orders at the special pre-publication price of $5 may be sent now to Perri Press, Box 5007, Portland 13, Oregon.

"GRAY MAHATMA" GOOD

I'm one of those who just can't understand why you returned to the old size magazine so quickly. Many magazines in your field find the pocket size works fine. Judging from your readers' column, there were as many letters praising the change as condemning it. And most of the objections were to the elimination of illustrations. In the issue containing "War of the Worlds" you finally struck just the right note. It was of a size that would be most convenient. If again had the old-style cover illustration and interior pictures. And it was a neat, handy, and dignified size.

I do hope that, once in a great while (I'm not going to ask for any frequent appearance), you'll run one of the old Munsey stories in F.F.M. Under your latest policy you could do so. Just don't use the ones that have ever been reprinted before. I just can't bear the thought of never getting to read some of those yarns you didn't get around to in F.N.

Congratulations on "The Gray Mahatma." Here's a Talbot Mundy story I didn't know existed, and a good one.

I've liked most of your recent stories. For some reason, although it didn't have much fantasy element, I really enjoyed "Threshold of Fear. "Slayer of Souls" seemed awfully crude in spots, but at times it really created some suspense. I certainly like to see some weird stories coming in. I second Henry Barnett's praise of "Undying Monster."

Your short stories have been fine, too. But you still neglect some of the classic masters of the weird. You could publish innumerable stories by Arthur Machen, M. R. James, Algernon Blackwood, J. Sheridan Le Fanu, M. P. Shiel, E. F. Benson, and others. I hope to see more of these. And I am opposed to straight science fiction reprints—even good ones like those you've used.

For novels, I certainly hope you'll try to get some of Charles Williams' work—such as "Descent into Hell," "All Hallows Eve." He's considered great. I'd also like to see "Houseboat on the Styx" and lots more by Haggard and Taine. I'm still waiting for "Wisdom's Daughter, "People of the Mist," and "Green Fire." Any rare Burroughs or Kline item would be welcome, too.

F.F.M. is the top reprint magazine, and there is a good deal of competition. Long may she stay at the top of the heap! Don't ever lose those fine artists. But how about more illustrations? Please stick to fantasy and continue to surprise us occasionally with stories we hadn't heard about before.

DONALD V. ALLGEIER.

San Marcos,
Texas.

HIGH STORY STANDARD

Have just purchased the Dec., 1951 issue of F.F.M., and am glad to see that even though you have changed back to the old format, you've been able to retain your high story standard.

"The Gray Mahatma" by Talbot Mundy is by no means a great classic, but was good entertaining reading, and I enjoyed it. "Pickman's Model" by HPL was delightful and thoroughly terrifying. Next came "—And He Built a Crooked House" by Robert Heinlein. Bob can always turn out a good yarn, but this is one of his best. "The Book" and "He Didn't Want Soup" were both par, nothing to rave about, but not too bad.

See you published one of my letters. Thank you muchly! Always glad to see the old name in print, you know.

I have a large list of back issue books and magazines which I'll sell at very moderate prices.

Till the Martians get us,

I remain yours fantastically,

ROBERT DENNIS MCNAMARA.

50 Plaza St.
Brooklyn 17, N. Y.

(Continued on page 12)

6 MAGIC WORDS

GIVE YOU DAILY CASH

KENDEX NYLONS ARE FREE UNLESS SATISFACTORY!

Amazing, but true! The most sensational offer ever made! Can you imagine how much money you could make writing orders for wonderful nylons that actually cost nothing unless satisfactory? Is there any woman who would hesitate to wear beautiful nylons at OUR risk? Nothing like this has ever been heard of in the hosiery industry. Never before was it possible for any man or woman, young or old, to earn a steady income so easily!

The leading Kendex full fashioned, sheer de luxe first quality nylons have just been reduced to only $.98 a pair INCLUDING your commission, bonus and even postage. This stocking is so finely made—gives so much wear, that KENDEX will refund the full $.98 purchase price if the hose do not give satisfactory wear within a period of ONE AND A HALF MONTHS! If the hose runs, snags or shows undue wear, the hose will cost the customer nothing!

We don't care if you are 18 or 80—whether you have one hour or 50 hours a week to spare. How can you help make a lot of money? Women buy two million pairs of nylons every day. Just say "Kendex nylons are FREE unless satisfactory" and practically every woman will be eager to give you an order.

There is nothing for you to buy or deliver. You don't risk a dime. Pay nothing now or later. Just mail the coupon, that's all. We'll send you FREE SAMPLE STOCKING and complete money-making outfit postage prepaid. You write orders. We deliver and collect. Advance cash plus huge cash bonus that increases your earnings by 40%. No obligation. If you don't make more money than you thought possible, throw the outfit away! Need we say more?

KENDEX CORPORATION BABYLON 89, N. Y.

FREE SAMPLE STOCKING

Date.....

Kendex Corporation
Babylon 89, N. Y.

Send me, absolutely free and postage prepaid, your complete money-making outfit including free sample stocking. It is understood I am under no obligation and if I am not satisfied with the money I make, I will throw away the whole outfit.

Name

Address .....

City Zone.... State.....

(Continued from page 10)

FOR COLLECTORS

I have for sale a complete set of Arkham House books. Included in this lot are such sought-after collector's items as "The Outsider & Others," "Beyond the Wall of Sleep," and "Marginalia," all by H. P. Lovecraft; "Out of Space and Time" and "Lost Worlds" by Clark Ashton Smith, "Slan" by A. E. Van Vogt, and "Someone in the Dark" by August Derleth.

I also have quite a few back issue magazines to dispose of. Included are issues of F.F.M., F.N., *Super Science,* and many of the other science fiction and fantasy publications. A post card will bring any interested collector a complete list.

GERRY DE LA REE.

277 Howland Ave.
River Edge, N. J.

NEW FAN MAG

On January 1st, 1952 (past history to you readers) I expect to put out Volume 1, Number 1 of OOPSLA, my own fan mag. Sub rates are 10c per copy, 60c a year at a bi-monthly schedule. At that price goes the possibility of an annish. Or, you can have a short-term sub of half a year for 30c (three issues).

I'm running a different type of ad. something new in *fan*dom. I call them personals. They will be all on one page and connected by .'s to set them apart. A few samples follow:

. . . Read *Hotair,* the puffed up zine edited by M. Fulla Gas, 178 Windy Avenue, Dallas, Texas. It contains many articles, fan-fiction, news, ads and a general treasure house of fun. That's *Hotair,* at 10c a copy, 50c a year. . . John Q. Fann, has many s-f mags and books for sale at 1734 N. 34th Street, New York, N. Y., for reasonable prices. Many old F.F.M., F.N. and S.S.S. Send card for list. And so on.

Now, fans, isn't that a lot for 10c? I think so, so if you have something to sell, get it in today in the next personals column.

Before signing off, Mrs. Gnaedinger, I'd like to say thank you for your time and patience. F.F.M. still remains tops in fantasy for me, and please keep all science-fiction out of our magazine. And I would surely like to see you revive *Fantastic Novels.* Won't you please say you'll see what can be arranged? If you can't do that, please try and merge them again to produce a monthly for us, will you? Thanks again, for a fine mag.

GREGG CALKINS,
Editor-to-be OOPSLA.

930 Briarcliff Ave.,
Salt Lake City 16, Utah

THANKS FOR A GRAND TIME

It seems that F.F.M. just gets better and better. At any rate I enjoy it more with each issue. So I guess that means that as far as I'm concerned the improvement is a steady curve upward.

The Dec. issue was a beautiful specimen. I note with pleasure that the mag is back to its old size once again. I like that size much better. Now I wonder if those few digest sized copies will in the future be much sought after collectors' items. Anyway, I'm saving mine.

I was glad to see the two comparatively recent shorts by Heinlein and Miss Irwin. Occasionally when reading those stories copyrighted about 1923 I get the feeling one does when looking through old mags in the attic on a rainy evening, but those two stories helped bring F.F.M. right up to tomorrow. Or so it seemed.

One of the things I like most about F.F.M. is the illos. And the one on page 12 and 13 in the Dec. ish could almost be called great! However, in illustrating "The Spirit Boats" it seemed that somehow Finlay missed the boat with that spread. And what could have been wonderful was merely better than most, but not quite as good as might have been. Still *all* the illos were very good. As they should be, for I feel you have the very best artists in the fantasy field. What I don't understand is why you don't use more Bok and Finlay on the covers. I have seen many covers in the past by both, and always felt they had done an excellent job.

I for one second the motion as to having more editor's comments after letters and a longer editorial. I know this proposal would mean a lot more work but I believe it would be worth every bit of it. We *do* want to hear from you! Even as you want our opinions. So how about it?

I notice that finally the movies have awakened to the possibilities of our kind of literature and science fiction, and have a large number of such films scheduled for production. All we fan and fen can say is: "At last!"

I want to welcome all fellow fans everywhere to write. I promise to answer every letter. And if you are just getting starting in fandom and have any questions, send them along. I've been reading quite a while and I'll be glad to answer, if I can.

Thanks for a grand time, Mrs. Gnaedinger. And best of luck.

IVAN H. COPAS.

R.F.D. No. 3
Peebles, Ohio.

LASFS ANNOUNCEMENT

The Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society (LASFS) needs Associate Members. Why? To enable us to continue publishing and distributing our club magazine, Shangri-la, which has been one of the most widely known magazines of its type during the past sixteen years.

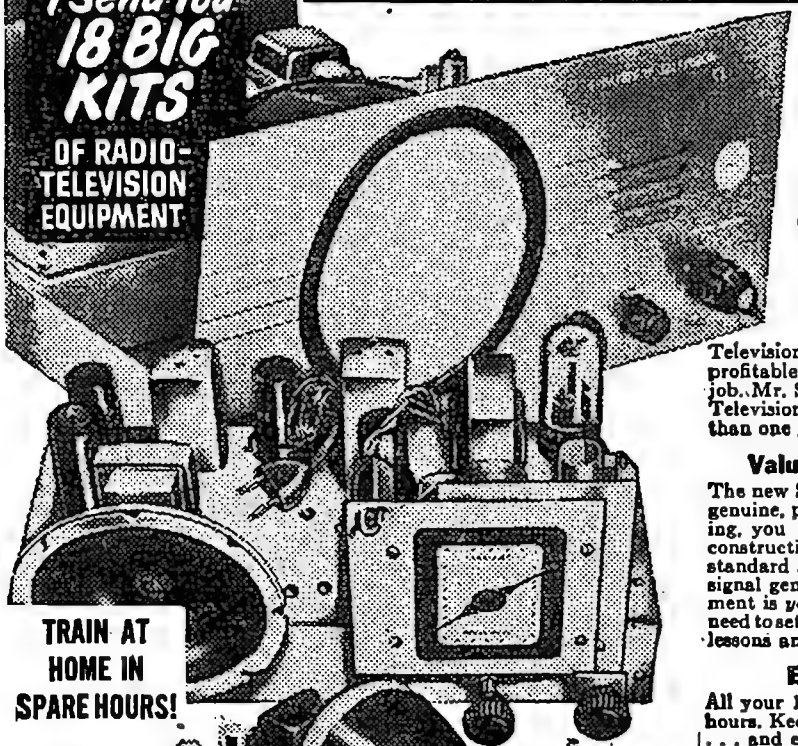
We point with pride to the fact that Shangri-La is devoted to serious, though lively, discussion and presentation of science-fiction and fantasy, is devoid of personal feuding and excursions into non-sf fields.

Your subscription to Shangri-La will assure you a minimum of ninety-six pages of mimeographed and lithographed material, giving a resumé of the activities of LASFS, articles, stories, critiques and art work by fans (perhaps yourself). In addition, from time to time, some of the pros let their hair down, as they never can in professional publications. A sample list is Kris Neville, Van Vogt, Bryce Walton, Ross Rocklynne, and Ray Bradbury.

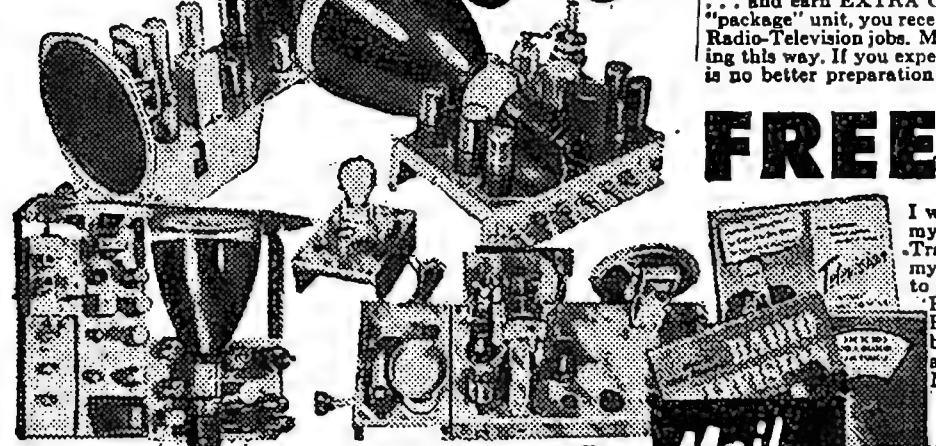
(Continued on page 14)

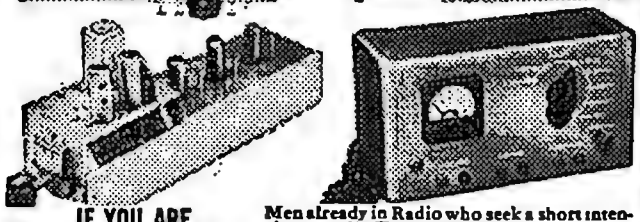
NOW-Be a Fully Trained, Qualified RADIO TELEVISION TECHNICIAN IN JUST 10 MONTHS OR LESS!

I Send You 18 BIG KITS OF RADIO-TELEVISION EQUIPMENT



TRAIN AT HOME IN SPARE HOURS!





IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCED IN RADIO

Men already in Radio who seek a short intensive 100% TELEVISION Training with FULL EQUIPMENT INCLUDED are invited to check and mail the coupon at the right.

New "Package" Unit Training Plan—Pay As You Learn—You Set The Pace!—No Monthly Payment Contract to Sign!—Train at Home in Spare Hours!

Now . . . be ready for Radio-Television's big pay opportunities in a few short MONTHS! Frank L. Sprayberry's completely new "Package" training unit plan prepares you in just 10 MONTHS . . . or even less! There is NO monthly payment contract to sign . . . thus NO RISK to you! This is America's finest, most complete, practical training—gets you ready to handle any practical job in the booming Radio-Television industry. In just 10 months you may start your own profitable Radio-Television shop . . . or accept a good paying job. Mr. Sprayberry has trained hundreds of successful Radio-Television technicians—and stands ready to train you in less than one year, even if you have no previous experience!

Valuable Equipment Included With Training

The new Sprayberry "package" plan includes many big kits of genuine, professional Radio-Television equipment. While training, you perform over 300 demonstrations, experiments and construction projects. In addition, you build a powerful 6-tube standard and short wave radio set, a multi-range test meter, a signal generator, signal tracer, many other projects. All equipment is *yours to keep* . . . you have practically everything you need to set up your own service shop. The Sprayberry book-bound lessons and other training materials . . . all are yours to keep.

Earn Extra Money While You Learn!

All your 10 months of training is AT YOUR HOME in spare hours. Keep on with your present job and income while learning . . . and earn EXTRA CASH in addition. With each training "package" unit, you receive extra plans and ideas for spare time Radio-Television jobs. Many students pay for their entire training this way. If you expect to be in the armed forces later, there is no better preparation than good Radio-Television training.

FREE 3 BIG RADIO-TELEVISION BOOKS

I want you to have ALL the facts about my new 10-MONTH Radio-Television Training—without cost! Rush coupon for my three big Radio-Television books: "How to Make Money in Radio-Television," PLUS my new illustrated Television Bulletin PLUS an actual sample Sprayberry Lesson—all FREE. No obligation and no salesman will call. Mail coupon NOW! I will rush all three books at once!

Sprayberry Academy of Radio, 111 North Canal St. Dept. 53-G Chicago 6, Ill.

Mail Coupon Today!

NO OBLIGATION No Salesman Will Call

SPRAYBERRY ACADEMY OF RADIO, Dept. 53-G
111 North Canal St., Chicago 6, Ill.

Please rush to me all information on your 10-MONTH Radio-Television Training Plan. I understand this does not obligate me and that no salesman will call upon me.

Name.....Age.....

Address.....

City.....Zone....State.....

Please Check Below About Your Experience

☐ Are You Experienced? ☐ No Experience

(Continued from page 12)

The LASFS now maintains, through membership fees and donations, a library, clubroom, and mimeograph equipment. These items cost approximately forty dollars a month. Therefore, Shangri-La can be published only if enough Associate Memberships are obtained. These Associate Membership dues make possible the publication of this magazine, by adding this extra help which could not be given by the active club membership alone.

Let us look at it from the standpoint of how we use a dollar. Postage uses up twenty-four cents, envelopes twelve cents, and printing supplies forty cents. These figures are based upon an Associate Membership of one hundred, and a magazine of the minimum size allowable by fan publishing standards. Frequently there are special issues, which contain more material, and are better illustrated. These, plus stationery and membership cards, use up the remaining twenty-four cents of the dollar.

We hope that you, too, will share our pride in the fact that the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, for sixteen years an active group, is the oldest science-fiction fan club in the United States.

The future of Shangri-La, and your own enjoyment of this magazine is up to you. Your dollar sent by return mail will insure this future.

Please! May we hear from you? Address Al Lewis, care LASFS, 1395 W Ingraham St., Los Angeles. California.

The Associate Membership Committee,
By Al Lewis, Chairman

SATISFIED READER

I have read one or two *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* magazine, and I thoroughly enjoyed them. Over here in Scotland we can't get this magazine. I wonder if any of your readers would like to exchange American science-fiction books for British published ones of which I have at hand several hundred.

Another thing, Editor, I often seen fans advertising for books by Edgar Rice Burroughs. I have every copy of his books with the exception of his three Westerns, so if any of your U.S.A. readers are interested in a swap, I would exchange them for American magazines of any kind or description.

A satisfied British reader,
GAVIN BROWN.

47 Causeyside St.,
Paisley,
Renfrewshire, Scotland.

COLLECTORS' ITEM

The December issue had quite a line-up of stories and authors. Probably the best for quite some time. No doubt most of the readers would enjoy seeing you go ahead and reprint all of Mundy's novels. In fact, why not?

The illustrations were really nice in this issue. I liked Bok's the best, though. He can always be depended upon to come up with something fresh and original. One thing that I have always been looking forward to and have never yet seen in F.F.M. is a Bok cover. Just once could it be done?

I have an announcement that may be of interest to your readers.

In late 1940 there appeared a printed fan magazine called *Bizarre*. It was dated Jan. 1941 and featured some names that are familiar to readers of fantasy. Only a few copies were ever distributed, and the editors made that issue their last, dropping out of all fan activities.

It featured the first appearance of H. P. Lovecraft's "The Thing in the Moonlight"; the original Merritt ending of "Dwellers in the Mirage" which varied from the other printed versions; articles by E. E. Smith, Ph.D.;; John W. Campbell, Jr.; and Forest Ackerman. Also featured was a cover by Bok, and interior by Bok, and an autobiography by Bok.

In tracking down a copy of this magazine for my own files, I also found a few copies left of this legendary item! I am now able to offer a few limited copies at $1.00 each postpaid.

DONALD E. FORD.

129 Maple Ave.,
Sharonville,
Ohio.

LIKED ERNST STORY

I've just finished reading my first F.F.M. and have found it one of the most thrilling mags I've ever purchased (December, 1951).

I especially liked "He Didn't Like Soup" by Paul Ernst. And let me congratulate you on a wonderful cover.

ELLEN EDLEFSEN.

Box 462,
Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

AN APPRECIATION OF FANTASY

This is just a letter of appreciation of the enjoyment your fine Fantasy magazine; F.F.M. has given me.

Being somewhat of an artist and a writer myself, I enjoy tremendously the skillful manner and craftsmanship of your artists and writers. To me, fantasy is the highlight of all the great imaginations of our world. To escape from the realities and the pressures of everyday life seems to be the secret hope and desire of all mankind. Here in the fantasy field we see the escape portrayed in the skillful pen lines of a great artist like Finlay and in the magnificent descriptions of the dean of all fantasy writers, A. Merritt.

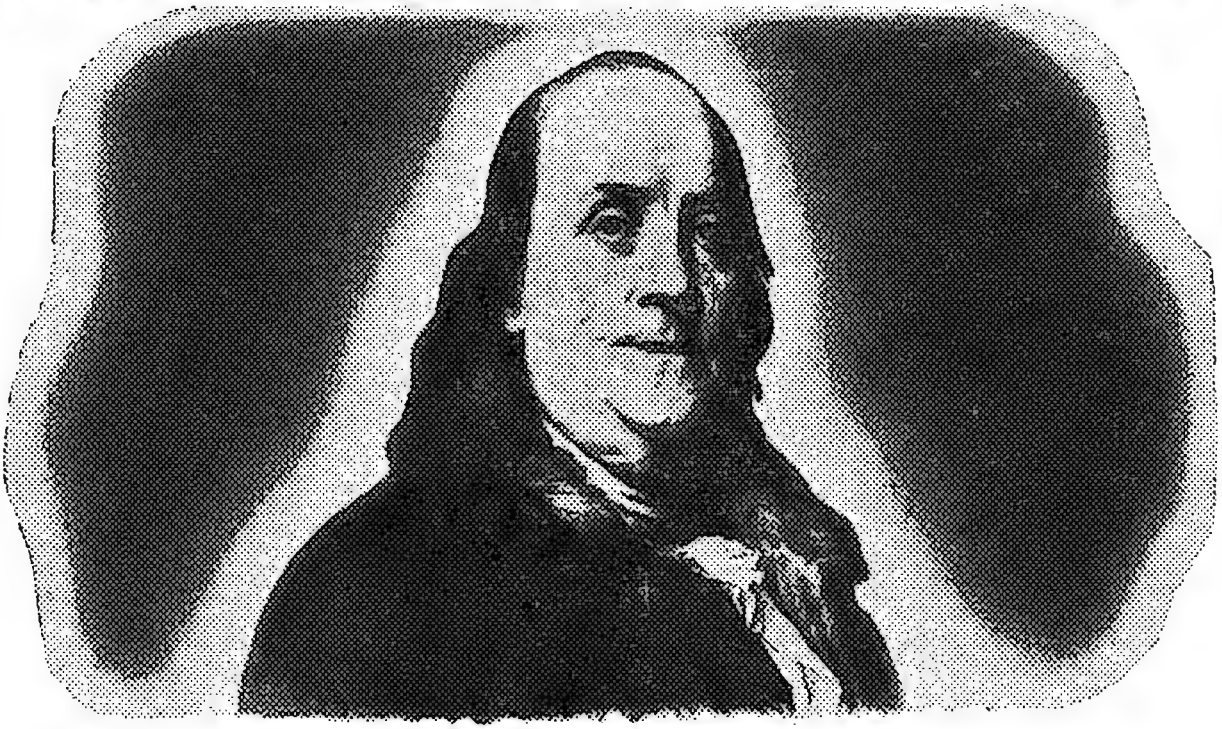
To me, novels like "The Moon Pool," "The Conquest of the Moon Pool," "The Black Wheel," "The Ship of Ishtar," "The Metal Monster," are fulfillments of what man can do when his imagination seeks escape in other more beautiful worlds; and perhaps because he believed so strongly in the secret world he has envisioned he could write so poetically and beautifully about it. I speak of Merritt in this category.

There are other worlds. Worlds of shadows, of horror, of terror, which the thrilling pens of such greats as Lovecraft and Poe have inscribed upon man's heart and soul forever.

What is fantasy but an escape, a releasing of man's imagination into a field which knows no

(Continued on page 110)

WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

WHY was this man great? How does anyone—man or woman—achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

Know the mysterious world within you! Attune yourself to the wisdom of the ages! Grasp the inner power of your mind! Learn the secrets of a full and peaceful life! Benjamin Franklin—like many other learned and great men and women—was a Rosicrucian. The Rosicrucians (NOT a religious organization) first came to America in 1694. Today, headquarters of the Rosicrucians send over seven million pieces of mail annually to all parts of the world.

The Rosicrucians
SAN JOSE (AMORC) CALIFORNIA

THIS BOOK FREE!

Write for YOUR FREE COPY of "The Mastery of Life"—TODAY. No obligation. No salesmen. A nonprofit organization. Address: Scribe D.L.W.

SEND THIS COUPON

Scribe D.L.W.
The ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC)
San Jose, California

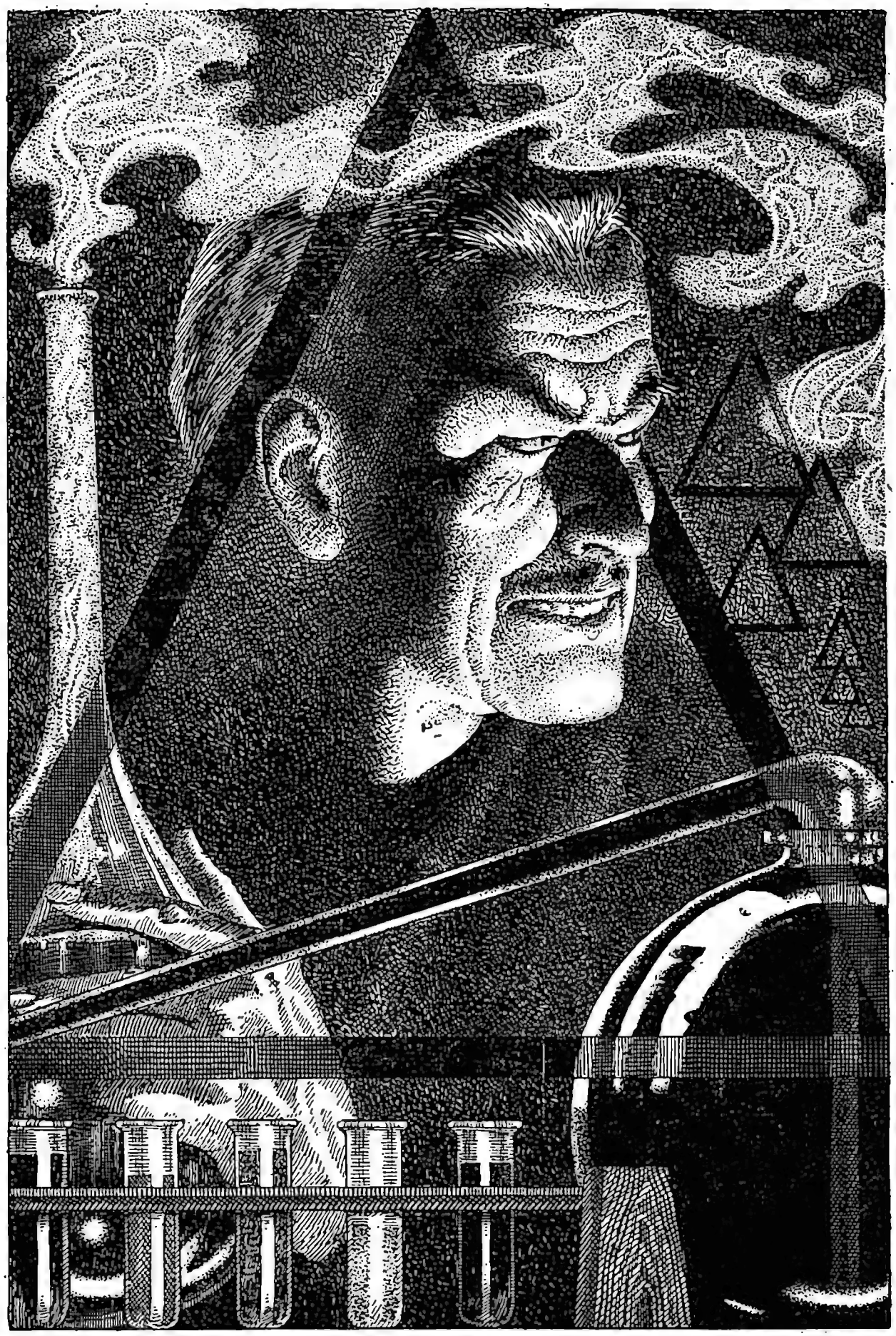
Please send me the *free* book, *The Mastery of Life*, which explains how I may learn to use my faculties and powers of mind.

NAME_____

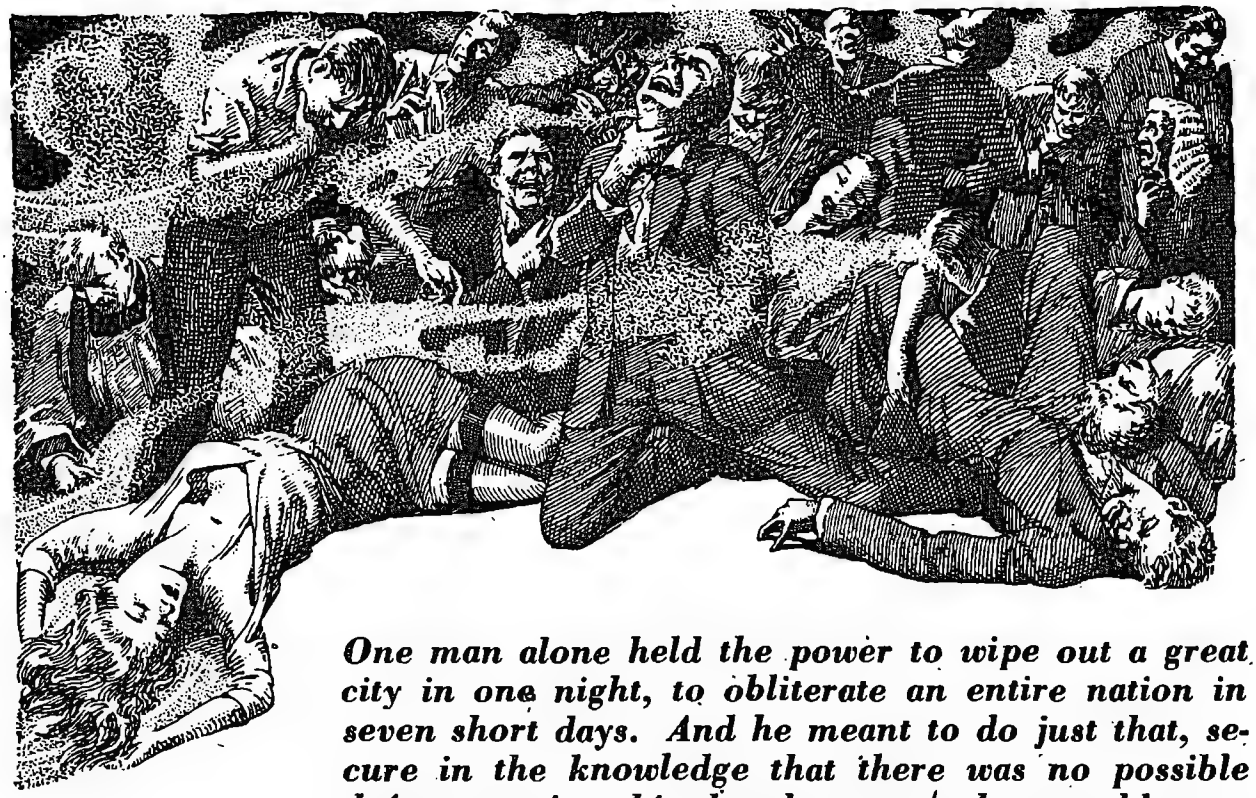
ADDRESS_____

CITY_____

ZONE_____ STATE_____



"I tell you, Vorst has already commenced his campaign. . . ."



One man alone held the power to wipe out a great city in one night, to obliterate an entire nation in seven short days. And he meant to do just that, secure in the knowledge that there was no possible defense against his dread weapon that would soon make him the mad master of all human destiny!

THE DEATH MAKER

By Austin J. Small

CHAPTER I

THE BLACK TRIANGLE

IT IS one of the most inspiring verities of life that the greatest events may turn on the hazard of the merest fluke. The most commonplace circumstance, the most innocuous off-chance, may yet be potent enough to turn the whole course of a man's career.

Dr. Ferrers Hollis realized the personal application of that worn truth with something of a shock, when on that perfect morning in May he decided to take a quiet stroll along the Embankment instead of going up the Strand. A mere turning to the right instead of to the left. . A man could hardly be called upon to make a more harmless decision than that.

The Strand was the straighter road and the shorter cut for anyone whose business concerned the grey old pile of the Law Courts at the beginning of Fleet Street and whose starting point was the back end of Trafalgar Square. On the face of it, it was a fairly obvious choice.

But the Embankment called, the soft wind of the morning called, the silver-bright sparkles on the dirty old water called—it was all so spendidly in tune with the first warm blessing of the young sun—and Dr. Hollis, swinging a jaunty black cane, headed blithely along Northunderland Avenue.

In doing so he arraigned himself definitely in the lists of one of the greatest battles in the annals of criminal history, a mammoth war

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that was being fought out to a relentless finish behind the normal-scenes of London life, and which, owing to its hugeness of conception and the magnitude of its scope, at first staggered and then appalled him. He stepped buoyantly along towards Cleopatra's Needle, that inscrutable old obelisk that had pondered the intrigues of Egypt's pharaohs before ever it stood sentinel of the harassments of Dr. Hollis.

Dr. Hollis was one of those middle-aged men whom you instinctively take to. You liked him at first sight. He had natural charm, the charm that is born of, and is dying with, the old school. You noticed first of all that he was rather portly, and that he was dressed according to the most fastidious traditions of the Faculty—smooth frock coat and the glossiest of silk hats, thin-striped trousers and patent-toed shoes.

Then you saw that he had a pink complexion and beaming eyes. There was a jovial twinkle in those blue eyes that was at once reassuring and endearing. You knew intuitively that Dr. Hollis could be the staunchest of friends and the loyalest of allies, provided your motives were worthy. His was a kindly face, yet at the back of the mask of benignity was a hint of absolute inflexibility of purpose; whatever his conscience dictated, that Dr. Hollis would do, though the stars burst or the heavens fell. His record, both private and professional, was as shiningly bright as any possessed by his Harley Street colleagues—and most of them, at one time or another, had come to him for light and guidance.

For Hollis was the greatest analytical chemist of his day. He was one of those amazing men who could take a tiny piece of flesh, reduce it to its elements of carbons, sugars and salts, subject it to tests and reagents, expose it to a bewildering sequence of acids and alkalines, and then pronounce an infallable judgment upon it. He could state with the utmost certitude whether the body from which the flesh was taken was poisoned or not, the precise nature of the toxin employed and the exact measurement of the dose administered, to say nothing of the date of death and the general health of the body before demise.

The government had called for his expert assistance on scores of urgent occasions, and his name had figured prominently in the records of many a famous criminal trial.

The only oddity about him was that he did not look his part. He was much more the typical benevolent old gentleman than the great pathologist whose word, coldly logical and quietly delivered, meant life or death to the prisoner in the dock.

He strolled along, humming a carefree little snatch of song to the bright of the morning.

When nearly abreast of the Needle, he paused, leaning on the parapet to admire the masterly seamanship of a tugboat which, with a great unwieldy string of barges in tow, was executing a down-tide turning movement in midstream.

He watched, with genuine admiration. He had witnessed the same scene scores of times; but Hollis was one of those men whose keen appreciation was not dulled by repetition nor blunted by usage. The manoeuvre finished as the line of barges swung into a perfect standstill at a wharf on the Surrey side.

And it was just then that Dr. Hollis became dimly aware of a second figure leaning against the parapet. He did not turn round or look at him. He was not unduly concerned about him just then, but he was vaguely conscious of being no longer alone. He knew, almost without knowing it, that another man had taken up a position at his side.

Then, as he turned away, he glanced at the man who, with arms propped on the stonework, was gazing sombrely down the river. Hollis frowned with a quick passing shadow of remembrance. It was as though a memory had just flashed up and out of the past, and vanished again, too swift for capture.

He paused and looked again, taking his time over his scrutiny.

It was a striking face, handsome in more ways than one. There was something in the poise of the head that gave it culture, an aristocratic, autocratic pride of dignity. It was deep-lined, tanned almost to the colour of old oak, and there was a hardness about it so noticeable that the features might have been chiselled out of brown rock. The lips were thin but finely shaped—Hollis made a mental memorandum that they were the most determined lips he had ever seen in his life. And the chin beneath added to their dominance and character. His figure was swart, healthily athletic, the perfect figure for a man just merging into the thirties. And he was perfectly dressed and groomed.

But it was his eyes that attracted attention most. Steel-grey they were, with a hint of real blue lurking in their depths, like chips of steel cooling after a vicious tempering. The blue came intermittently, like the occasional glint on the hardened metal when the light flashes slantwise across it. They looked true; but they were bitter—bitter as gall: the eyes of a man who had passed through the ultimate fires and had not come out unscathed.

Two long furrows crinkled across the doctor's forehead.

Somewhere he had seen those eyes before: somewhere—before the bitterness got into

them. Now, where on earth was it! Such an unusual face as that. Odd that it should have slipped his memory. Such remarkable eyes, too. The bitterness of them . quite unforgettable something to remember for a lifetime.

DR. HOLLIS, in a brown study, passed on, leaving the sombre-eyed stranger standing motionless against the parapet, his face turned away to where the mists hung faintly over the reaches towards Blackfriars.

As he moved away he caught a glimpse of the man's hands—and his eyebrows shot up in surprise. In spite of the culture of that aristocratic head and the air of leadership stamped into that resolute face, he was obviously a man who had toiled hard for his living, whose wages were dependent upon a due output of hard manual labour.

For the hands were all calloused and rough; the nails were coarse and broken, and there were corns of hardened skin deep ingrained in the palms.

"Very queer; very odd!" muttered Hollis, plucking thoughtfully at his chin. "I'm sure I know him—know him well, too. Extraordinary how people pass out of one's life and are never even remembered unless they happen to bob up again—like that. Now, let me see. Where could it have been? India—no, he is probably too young: thirty years since I was breathing the heat of Bombay. Africa—Hardly; he didn't get that colour in Africa. Hospitals? I—"

At that moment pedestrians along the Embankment were surprised and quietly amused to see a rather stout old gentleman halt in his stride and swing round abruptly with a look of startled amazement on his face.

"Good heavens!" he said. "Maine! It's Maine! Kellard Maine of the old Slaughterhouse!"

A moment later the portly old gentleman was bustling his way back again, muttering, "Well, bless my soul!" at every other step.

His head was a whirling riot of flying thoughts—odd fragments of memories that went racing back to the days when he was house surgeon to the great hospital indelicately known to the students as the Slaughterhouse, to the days when Maine, a young man walking the wards for his finals, was the most astonishing young prodigy he had ever encountered. There was the hallmark of genius in all he conceived and did. Young Kellard Maine outshone his contemporaries of that year as boldly as the moon outshines the stars. He was unique; you could not put another man up against him for a comparative. He simply ate up medical knowledge, absorbed it and retained it as avidly as a young thrush eats grubs.

Even in those early days he was propounding new theories of medicine and illness that had since been adopted, perfected and practised by the medical faculties of the world. All the great men of the profession were prophesying great things for him. "Another Lister," they said. "Another Pasteur come to teach us more than we know."

And then the meteor slipped out of the sky. Just when the world was opening its eyes and its arms to him, Kellard Maine vanished. He faded from existence right at the moment when, his examinations passed with brilliant ease, he seemed destined to establish himself into lasting fame.

He left no trace behind him; and no explanations were given. He just blotted himself out, leaving his great race unrun; a hot favourite that never even went down to the starting gate.

And now he was back again; just as mysteriously back out of nowhere, looking older than he was—and bitter beyond words.

Dr. Hollis stopped beside him and touched him on the arm. "You're Maine, aren't you?" he said. "Kellard Maine?"

The other started badly and whipped around like a thoroughbred jagged with the spur. The glare of savage defiance that suddenly leapt into his grey eyes positively made the old man jump. They were blazing, alive in a moment with fierce challenge. Hollis was almost ready to believe that the right hand flashed back to the hip pocket, swift as the kick of a mule's foot.

The sudden leaping glare had sought straight to Hollis' face. And the friendliness it found there disarmed him. The fierce alarm died away as quickly as it had arisen, except for the smouldering glint of animosity that still lingered. His limbs relaxed and he leaned forward, peering hard at the doctor.

"Yes, I'm Maine," he said slowly. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I don't want anything, my dear boy, except to inquire after your welfare after all these years," said Hollis kindly. He had sensed something disruptive in the younger man's manner. Every line of him, every look, every action spoke of some calamitous disaster that had scorched his very soul. "It really does seem ages since we last met," he added.

"Does it?" said Maine. His eyes roved restlessly up and down the sweep of the great esplanade.

"Yes, indeed. You surely remember me? Hollis—Ferrers Hollis of the old Slaughterhouse. Don't you remember?"

Maine looked up at him. He seemed walled

about with a dour reserve. His eyes slid over the doctor in an all-embracing sweep. There was an intentness about it, as though he were forcing his mind back to small beginnings, striving to recall exactly what Hollis had meant to him back in those far days.

He remembered him suddenly. His face cleared with a quick shadow of relief.

Then very quietly he said, "Yes, I remember you, Doctor. House surgeon, were you not? And quite a friend of mine. You had rather a high opinion of me in those days." He smiled a little rancorously. "Well, we can't help the swing of the pendulum, can we? Still as starchy as ever? You must be. Starchiness is one of those habits that grow on one—and you look so disgracefully respectable."

HOLLIS had never suspected young Maine of turning cynic. Something pretty awful must have happened, he thought. A man's nature doesn't change with the moon. "How—how long is it since we last discussed symptoms together?" he asked lamely.

"Fifteen years," said Maine definitely.

"Dear, dear! As long as that, is it? What a huge slice out of life! And what have you been doing all this time?"

"Fifteen years!" said Maine again, and he laughed sourly. "Horrible person to know, am I not?"

"I—er—I don't think I quite understand," said Hollis. His hand went up and diffidently fingered his tie, a habit he had got into whenever he was perturbed or puzzled.

"Penal servitude. Fifteen years of it. They've only just let me out." His voice was as taut as an overstrained violin string.

"Good God!" gasped Hollis. In that quaky moment he understood all about those eyes, the hungering bitterness that was bedded in them, the red fierceness that could spurt up to life in them at a mere word. And he understood, too, about the broken finger-nails and the calloused hands.

"Missed me all of a sudden, didn't you?" said Maine, a tolerant smile flickering at the corners of his mouth.

"Well—ah—I suppose you did vanish rather suddenly." The doctor was floundering about all over the place. Maine's forceful manner and his defiant admission had knocked all the complacency out of him. Somehow the morning seemed chillier; the sun had lost something of its happy warmth. He did not quite know what to do—or say.

Maine took the burden of doing either out of his hands.

"I'm glad I met you, Doctor," he said after a disastrously difficult little silence. "I've been wondering where I could find a—a friend. A real one, I mean."

"How much—" began Hollis, fumbling for his wallet.

"Bah! snorted Maine savagely. "I don't want money. I could buy you up, hospital and all, if I wanted to. There'll have to be more in the friend I need than the willingness to borrow or lend a handful of dollars. I want a *friend*—one who will lend a hand on one of the biggest jobs that has ever crossed the civilised skyline: a conception so impossibly tremendous that it might well have emanated from the brain of an imbecile. He'd have to sit down and assimilate the facts of a story so gigantic that it doesn't quite seem to fit into this modern age of progress and toleration. He would have to take his place at a Barmecide feast of credulity—and still retain sufficient faith in the prince's sanity to criticise the meal. And he would have to help!"

Hollis's reply was to take out a cigar, light it, prop his back against the parapet and wait.

"Maine, my lad, you were sane enough in the old days," he said, very distinctly.

"That's the boldest sentence I've heard for fifteen years," said Maine. "So you still have a morsel of faith left in your precociously bright pupil?"

"Quite a lot, my boy. Tell me, what did they send you to prison for?"

"Murder!"

Hollis jumped again. The shrewish directness of the man sent a cold shiver down his spine. Maine seemed unmindful of it. It was all past history to him—old stuff. It had lost its horror and its dread. Only the story remained, the story that declared itself in the glinting eyes.

Hollis did not stop to ask whether he was guilty or not. He had a sharp remembrance of the way he had said, "They've only just let me out." And an intelligent man doesn't phrase it like that, or infuse such a hellish tincture of bitterness into it, if he is guilty.

"Murder? We didn't hear anything about it at the hospital?" Hollis's surprised statement was almost in the nature of a question.

"Probably not. You see, it happened up in Liverpool, and was not granted space in the London dailies. In fact, it only got an inch or two in the locals. Dartmoor. That's where I got mine. And they've only just let me out."

"I was supposed to be holiday-making after taking a gentle canter through my finals. Poisons were my strong point, remember? You do remember. So, well and good; because this little affair rather concerns poisons."

"Come over and sit on this seat," said Hollis, pointing to a vacant one under an old tree that was all alive and sprouting with

fresh green. "We won't be so noticeable there."

"I am going to wait here," said Maine with placid determination. "I am waiting for the man I murdered!"

Hollis jerked his head around. "Good Lord!" he breathed. Maine was staring away down-stream again, his restless eyes roving over the clutter of boats moving on the bosom of the great tideway.

Then he said, "My boy, you had better get it off your chest. You've been keeping it corked up too long. Tell me all about it. Have a smoke?"

"No. I've rather got out of the habit."

"Then the sooner you get into it again the better," said Hollis, and he pushed a cigar case under Maine's nose.

Maine gave him one quick, hard look.

"I don't want any of your damned smokes," he said. There was not an atom of heat in the words, but from the way they were uttered, Hollis began to get his first true appreciation of the utter deadliness of the man who had come back out of nowhere. He also arrived at a fuller understanding of the bitterness that had fashioned that resolute face.

Hollis snapped his case shut, and thrust it back into his pocket.

Maine, leaving one arm on the parapet, fired off a question at the doctor.

"Did you ever hear of a man named Jaan Vorst?" he asked.

"No," said Hollis, puffing away.

"Well, that is excusable. He isn't widely known under that name. Its only merit is that it happens to be his real one."

"What is he?" inquired Hollis.

"A human devil," said Maine. "A human devil set on legs and let loose in the world. A man with the brain of a monster. I used to think that I was pretty well versed in poison lore—there was a time when the name of Maine was bracketed with the complete knowledge of the dictionary of toxicology. But since running foul of Jaan Vorst I have come to the conclusion that what I know about poisons wouldn't seriously incommode the cubic capacity of a thimble. Vorst is the whole unwritten lexicon on the subject, the entire anthology, cyclopaedia and compendium. He thinks in germs, talks bacteria and manipulates serums as a housewife handles dough. He's the one great living master of the subject.

"Not a very prepossessing gentleman, either. A mass of Continental cross-breeds, with a strong dash of the Eurasian handed down as a natal gift from his mother. A horrific mixture: he gets the direst derivatives of both sexes. A thin face with a parrot nose and lips that you have to look for twice. Thin ears, moulded out of flat wax—they seem to look brittle, somehow—and a wisp of a moustache that curves under his nose like a thin stroke of an eyebrow stick. That's Jaan Vorst, a man with the honourable name of a Hollander, but the soul of the mysterious East.

"Well, fifteen years ago, Jaan Vorst died. I murdered him. All the lawyers said so: and the lawyers are never wrong. They proved it; proved it without a shadow of doubt. The judge said it was the most obvious case he had ever tried. They weren't quite sure *how* I did it, admitted, but they certainly knew *why*—and when. It seems that he had been shot in the back and then pushed into the river—apparently the doctors found a pint or two of prime Mersey water in his lungs besides the ounce of nickel. He was very dead, anyway when they fished him out.

"PAPERS found on the body proved conclusively that he was Jaan Vorst and that he was going about in fear of his life. At any moment he was expecting a violent and wholly unpleasant end—and Kellard Maine, the London doctor, was the man he was frightened of. One letter, an unposted one to his partner, actually said he would be getting a bullet in his back from Maine before long. Other documents, half indecipherable from immersion, showed that I had been continually threatening him. They hinted, too, at a blood feud of old standing between us.

"To put the final touch on an immaculate job, Vorst's own watch, cigarette-case, visiting cards and wallet were found intact on the body. Inside the wallet was a letter—from me—vowing to shoot him on sight.

"Pretty cool, wasn't it? I don't think that personation of a dead body has ever been attempted before. But it was a beautiful conception, beautifully carried out. The only possible objection that I could raise was that I did not do it and that it was not Jaan Vorst's body up there on the slab. Otherwise, I suppose, the lawyers were all in order.

"You get me? The hallmark of the thinking criminal. He has imagination, that man. And brains—as many different brains as Argus had eyes. And they work on ice. He put one over on me that left me gulping like a gaffed cod. Vorst actually had the nerveless bestiality to murder an unknown, plant the identifications on him and then dump him in the river. It served the double purpose of eliminating me and of killing off an identity that had already become embarrassing to him. And all I could do was to stand there in the dock and yelp my innocence."

Maine broke off for a moment, as a news-

vendor, coming slowly up the Embankment with the early racing editions of the evening papers, stopped in front of him and said, "Paper, guv'nor? Racin' special?"

He was an unlovely individual and he spoke with a cringing wheeze. Maine looked at him for several seconds without a word. Then he slowly felt for a coin. "Yes," he said grimly, "I may as well buy it as have it thrust upon me. How much do you get for serving out death warrants?"

The man pushed the folded paper into Maine's hand and, without another word, turned and stepped on a tram that was sweeping down toward Westminster.

Hollis watched the incident with a puzzled frown on his face. His hand had gone up to his tie again.

"Queer customer, isn't he?" said Maine musingly, as he stared after the moving tramcar. "Do you know him?"

"Indeed I don't," said Hollis hurriedly.

"You'll probably meet him again," said Maine. He glanced down at the paper in his hand with a faint smile. "Odd that it should come now—just when a little proof—" He broke off and muttered. "But I was talking about Vorst, wasn't I? Where was I—oh, yes, in the dock.

"Well, now, try to get the hang of this thing as it happened to me. I was in Liverpool, waiting for a steamer to take me up to the Outer Hebrides; a friend of mine there was offering me a lively interlude with buck rabbits and rock salmon. In that evening's paper was the report of a so-called mystery patient over in the Birkenhead Infirmary, a man whose symptoms defied the doctors present. Apparently the man was infected with a new and hitherto unidentified poison. The job was right up my street. I went over and made a few investigations, and I was forced to a very startling conclusion.

"The doctors laughed at my diagnosis—a way old-timers have with tyros. But I knew that in some devilish way the man was being murdered. He was manufacturing poison inside him. His own system was creating it, killing him by inches. Everything he ate turned toxic. They were feeding him like a hog—and he was starving to death under their eyes.

"I diagnosed an active poison—gangrene. But the amazing thing was that it was internal. It had been introduced into that poor brute by degrees. It wasn't in the blood; there was no outward symptom at all. It remained organic. I knew something pretty awful was going on, because this should have turned to ptomaine—and it didn't. The germs had been treated in some horrible way before introduction so that they remained active in his system, a continual fountain of pollution. Whatever ghastly culture it was, it just took root there and infected every scrap of food the man ate.

"He wouldn't talk to the doctors. Said he had nothing to say and no explanation to offer as to how he got into his horrible state. But I made him talk. I told him bluntly what I knew. And I told him how many hours of life he still had left to him. For a long while he lay back among the pillows thinking hard. And then, in between gasps, he told me.

"I won't inflict the details on you. I'll just say this: whatever wrong that man had done to Vorst, it *could* not have justified the frightful agony that constricted him before he died. All he would say was that Jaan Vorst had got him. He said Vorst had sent him the Black Triangle and that nothing could save him. Vorst had paid him out for a wrong which I could not coax him to confess.

"I began making a few inquiries about this man Vorst. And . . well, I never went out to the Hebrides. That very night an uncouth looking gentleman lurched into me and left me with a piece of paper clutched in my hand. A plain piece of paper, Hollis, about six inches square. There was a black triangle painted on it, and in the middle of it the cryptic symbol, *11.30 a.m.* At precisely eleven-thirty the next morning I was arrested for the murder of Jaan Vorst.

"That was my first real introduction to him. How he had got to know about me, I don't know. But that's a way he has—getting to know about things that concern him. I got it, death sentence and all. And it was commuted after an appeal. And now I'm in the delightful situation of hunting for the man I've murdered. Quaint . and all that isn't it?"

Maine spoke banteringly, almost jocularly, but his eyes were blazing now like pellets of steel that had suddenly gone red-hot.

"This man Vorst," he said, edging up closer to the doctor. "He is a maniac. He has gone off the rails completely since I was sent away. I've been out a week, hunting up the details about him. Man alive! You wouldn't believe what I've run my head into! When the war broke out he was dumped into an internment camp with the rest of his tribe. It was known that for years he had been mixed up with a foreign espionage organisation. He was kept behind wire for years and then deported. And the thoughts of it have been festering in his brain ever since. It has been seething, fermenting, and now it has broken out into the most colossal war of hatred that has ever come within human conception.

"He is a ghoul, an ogre! He has stored up his hate and his insatiable ferocity until it

has overmastered him. He has actually, in his own savagely tremendous way, dared to declare war on the whole nation. I don't know what his ultimate plans are; I believe they entail the poisoning of the entire population through the pollution of food supplies. You can look incredulous! I know the possibilities and the capacity for fiendish slaughter in the brute. He has the financial backing of some unknown power in the East, and his initial plans are to wipe out the government. And he has the cunning and the ingenuity—*and* the viicous courage to do it.

"JUST think—it is not a quarter so difficult as it sounds. How many millions of *cans* of food are eaten each week in these islands! How many millions of *bottles* of food? How many millions of *tins* of milk? How many millions of *packets* of tea? You see? Jaan Vorst attacks the food supplies at the source! He is preparing a vast campaign. Seventy per cent of the food consumed in this country comes to us in bulk from abroad. Eighty per cent of our meat and ninety per cent of our flour comes in from overseas.

"You can name a thousand commodities that are part and parcel of our daily sustenance here but which are all bulked-up abroad. And it all comes, when you get down to bedrock facts, from an astonishingly few sources. The tea we drink: It is grown over countless miles of tropical country. But it is all *blended* in a few great warehouses here in London. A few bottles of his horrible germs liberated in those blending sheds would have millions of individuals dying of slow poison within a week. Five huge mechanical dairies in Switzerland supply us with nine-tenths of our tinned milk.

The same manoeuvre could be accomplished there with equal ease. Hundreds of different firms supply us with corned beef and frozen meat. But it *all* comes from Chicago and the Argentine. Attacking at the Chicago and the Argentinian source, one man could contaminate the whole of the nation's food supply in a fortnight. Everything is centralised. Vorst's job is not half so hard as it sounds. He has only to infect the very sacks that hold our corn for every single loaf that is baked in England to become a waiting poison trap for a whole family.

"Even the water we drink: it all comes from springs. No amount of filtering could eliminate the types of bacteria that Vorst employs. You see? He attacks always at the source. He poisons food in bulk—before it ever goes into the tins and bottles and bags and packets. It simplifies his task a thousandfold—makes it supremely possible. For water infection he can bury great tubes of his cultures in the springs themselves, discharging slowly into the stream. They would take weeks to empty. All the cattle down the river banks would become walking death traps. Villages and towns would go down with mysterious diseases like fields of corn beneath the scythe of the reaper.

"How far ahead he is with his plans I don't know; I daren't even think about that. But I know that he is working his campaign up to the last ultimate degree of perfection before he launches it. And when he does strike, Hollis, it will be chaos! Vorst is a fanatic, and he is preparing his plans with all the cold-blooded determination of the fanatic who has but one creed in life—revenge!

"I know you think I'm talking through my hat. You think I'm a raving maniac myself, don't you? But I tell you that Vorst has already commenced his initial campaign. Did you notice that extraordinary poisoning case in the *Times* this morning—Mr. Justice Vallis? His temperature suddenly went racing up to a positively ferocious height. He went out like a burst bubble—and his blood heat continued to rise even after death. Well, Vallis was the judge who deported Vorst! On his desk was a piece of paper, six inches square, with a mysterious symbol on it. Vallis had been given the Black Triangle before he died.

"And he wasn't the only one. Three days ago Sir Wilbert Hartigan coiled up and died—died of a disease that you yourself couldn't diagnose. The coroner called you in for the post-mortem, didn't he? And you admitted that you had no more idea what had killed him than the man in the moon. Well, you know now—Sir Wilbert was the official responsible for Vorst's internment. And the Black Triangle was found stuffed in the pen that signed his internment decree.

"And if you want further evidence, let me introduce you to a little piece that has happened right here under your very eyes." Kellard Maine suddenly flicked open the newspaper he had just bought. He held it out with a hand that was rock-firm.

Reposing in the fold was a piece of paper, six inches square. In the centre of it was a broad black triangle and inside it the single word, MIDDAY.

Dr. Hollis, shocked beyond words, looked up from the malignant thing. Kellard Maine's eyes, as sane as ever they were, were focussed on him in a look of absolute fearlessness. The doctor half attempted to speak, but Maine went on regardless.

"According to this, I have two hours to live," he said, and there was flat conviction in every syllable. "Vorst has never failed yet. But he is going to fail this time!" Maine

turned and pointed down river towards Blackfriars Bridge. "You see that little boat down there, that motorboat, heading upstream?" he asked.

"Yes, I see it," said Hollis.

"Jaan Vorst is in that boat! He has a laboratory somewhere down past the Pool—a vile hole that has no land entrance at all. The only ingress is by concealed water steps up from the river. It is nothing but a germ-farm—a place crawling alive with all the most hideous disease cultures you can think of. That is his lair—"

"But, my dear boy. Surely your duty is to go to the police and—"

"The police!" Maine flared back at him. "I've been to the police. I told them the whole story, and they squealed with glee at me. And why shouldn't they? Who on earth could believe such a story? I won't even ask *you* to! I'll just ask you to go over and sit quietly on that seat and see what happens here in less than five minutes. Jaan Vorst is coming up these steps—Vorst, the man I've murdered: the man who is holding the whole nation in the palm of his hand."

Dr. Hollis gazed at the swiftly approaching motorboat with profound perturbation. All the wild improbabilities of Maine's allegations, all his own inability to believe such an amazing story as he had just heard, fled before the sight of that boat. The very tone of Maine's voice, the icily deliberate way in which he made his statements, convinced him that he was brushing coat-tails with something right out of the ordinary.

If any further counsel for conviction were necessary he had it in full measure in the Black Triangle still fluttering in Kellard Maine's hand. That was the most unsettling element of all.

To Hollis, with his fruity old Tory outlook and his constitutional belief in the forces of law and order, it was positively frightening that such a thing could happen, without a hand being raised to prevent it, in the broad daylight of the greatest city on earth.

For it had suddenly become apparent to him that the Black Triangle was nothing less than a grim sentence of death. There was not the slightest doubt about that. Somewhere in London was an organization, so powerful and so unscrupulous that it could condemn a man to death—and carry out its sentence in complete defiance of the powers of the land.

And then into his heart came a hot surge of resentment. He was conscious of a burning indignation that so blatant a challenge could be flung in the teeth of the law and its perpetrators stand in no danger of the law's redress.

He tapped the younger man on the arm. His whole soul had already gone out to him, but he needed just that last little assurance.

"Maine," he said seriously, "do you assure me that what you have just told me is nothing but the simple truth?"

Maine looked at him coldly.

"Don't be a damned old fool!" he said, and jerked his head round to follow the progress of the boat.

Hollis mopped his forehead again. He, too, looked away downstream to where the motorboat was just emerging from a glut of small shipping under the railway bridge. He could see two figures in it, dimly.

One, the mechanic, was bending over the square, box-like engine house, tinkering up an adjustment in the motor. The other, a sombre huddled-up figure in a huge greatcoat, was sitting back motionless in the sternsheets with his arm crooked over the tiller. His eyes ranged fixedly ahead to where rose the mooring steps, wet, and glistening, under the shadow of the old obelisk.

THERE was something ominous in the very hang of that huddled frame, a sense of impending evil. It was as though its simple existence boded ill. Hollis could not see the features at all at that distance—the lower part of the face was hidden entirely in the fold of a great astrakhan collar. But for all his grim immobility, there was an atmosphere of dynamic force in every line of him.

"You see him?" said Maine quietly. "That's him—the one in the back of the boat; the man who has cultivated enough sudden death in that germ-farm of his to wipe out London in a night and all Britain in a week. The maker of death. He is just coming up from his germ-farm now."

"He is?"

"Yes. I've found out quite a lot about him since I first got my nose to the trail. Three times a week he makes this journey. I'm trying to find out what days he stays away. Because before very long I'm going to get into that germ-farm—and then there will be hell to pay. Your help will be wanted in that little affair, Doctor; that is, unless we can manage to get the brute arrested before he springs his mine."

"The moment you can produce me a single proof of all this, I shall proceed straight to Scotland Yard. They will listen to *me!*" declared Hollis grimly.

"Had any dealings with them before?"

"I happen to be holding the position of pathologist to the government."

Maine did not reply. He seemed to be mentally rubbing his hands.

"Does this man Vorst know you are Kellard Maine?" asked the doctor suddenly.

"No; I don't think so. That name died with me in Dartmoor. I let it die. All he knows is that someone has been nosing round hot on his scent this last few days. This is the result." Maine flicked the Black Triangle with his thumb. "So far as he knows I'm still in prison—or dead."

Hollis looked keenly up and down the Embankment. A hundred yards farther down, a couple of policemen were walking quietly towards them. One of them was smoking; Hollis guessed they were off duty. Maine had suffered too viciously at the hands of justice to have any faith in the ability of its minions to do more than see through a glass darkly; but Hollis was in different case. He made up his mind to stop those two dependable-looking fellows and hold them in conversation while Maine busied himself with Jaan Vorst.

The seat was barely a dozen yards away. He walked over to it and sat down. Maine resumed his rigid, statute-like stance by the parapet, his forearms propped on the capstone, his keen eyes fixed in an unwinking stare on the motorboat, now only a little way below him.

To Hollis, shocked and not a little nervous, there was something fine about the way he stood there. Without any fuss or theatricality in any single thing he did, there was yet a terrific sense of the dramatic about him. A man who had been burned in the fires, a man who had been hammered by Fate till nothing else remained but the stony determination to right his wrongs, burning there like a white-hot coal in his breast.

He watched Vorst get out of the boat, bending his head down with a sort of supercritical scrutiny. Vorst dismissed his mechanic, who, without a word, pushed in the clutch and sped away upstream. The Eurasian walked quietly up the steps and turned round by the parapet.

Maine waited for him, cold as an iceberg. Then, when he had drawn almost abreast of him, he stepped up, and in his low, normal voice, said:

"I think you want to see me?"

Vorst looked up in slight surprise and gave him a hurried glance.

"I think you have made a slight mistake," he murmured politely, and attempted to pass on. But Maine, with a quick step to the right, barred his way.

"No," he said firmly; "I don't think I've made a mistake. If you don't want to see me, I can assure you I want to see you!"

"My good man, let me pass. You have confused me with someone else. I don't know you, and, if I am, not being rude, I don't in the least wish to know you. Let me pass."

"But you sent me your card," persisted Maine, with a steely ferocity tinging every syllable.

"I did?" said Vorst, standing back a step.

"Yes, by hand—this morning. I've come to see you about it."

There was something in Maine's voice, some indefinable suggestion of blue-hot daggers sticking out among the words that made Vorst pause and give him a prolonged stare. This man with the bitter, hawk-like face was in earnest. His razor-like directness told him he had made no mistake. Vorst closed up like a box. He just stood his ground and waited for the other man to do the talking.

"You don't seem to recognize me," said Maine.

"I do not," said Vorst distinctly.

"A pity. And rather callous, too. It isn't the rule for one murderer to disdain another, is it?"

Vorst stiffened. In a flash he became as acutely alert as a stoat scenting blood. Maine, warlike, masterful as a tyrant, edged him over against the parapet and pinned him there. He glanced across at Hollis. The doctor, a little to his surprise, was deep in conversation with two affable-looking policemen. A wintry smile hovered on the corners of his mouth. Vorst, too, had followed his gaze and, with deepening perturbation, noted the constables.

"I—er—I'm afraid I don't quite understand you," he said stiffly.

"You will! You'll understand me quite a lot before I'm through with you. I'll explain myself quite briefly. My ultimate object is to see six feet of wind between your feet and the ground. That, I can tell you quite frankly, is the official adjustment of the drop at Dartmoor. I made a personal note of it."

VORST was watching him out of eyes that were half closed. The lids had lowered till only a bare slit of eyeball remained visible, but no cat ever watched a mouse with such concentrated oblivion of everything else as Vorst watched Maine. He had sensed the relentless atmosphere of battle that stood out all round him, visible as a cloak, realised that in that mysterious unknown with the mask-like face and the dominating personality, he had found himself suddenly confronted with the greatest danger he had ever known. He hadn't the least idea who he was or what his intentions were, but it was obvious, right from the first moment, that he knew a great deal more than was natural, and that by some inexplicable means or another he had become possessed of knowledge that made him a fac-

tor wholly demanding Vorst's consideration.

He fenced and clung to his pose of ignorance.

"I don't in the least understand you," he said, thrusting his hands into his great pockets. "Perhaps you would care—"

"The pleasure," said Maine grimly, "is all mine!" He deftly flicked open the Black Triangle with his hand and held it up under Vorst's nose.

"You had the honour to send me this little intimation of impending calamity this morning," he said.

Vorst looked at the sinister piece of paper. His expression never altered by so much as the twitch of an eye.

"I'd just like to mention," went on Maine smoothly, "that if it were not for those two pestiferous policemen standing there, I'd smash your teeth in for you. Maybe there is still time. I'd like to indulge myself in that little pleasure." He rustled the paper ominously in his hand. "And I want to know what you propose doing about it," he added.

Vorst maintained a stony silence. Whatever incriminating observations were going to be made that day were not going to be made by him.

"Vallis got one of these, didn't he?" went on Maine. "And so did poor old Hartigan. I don't know how many more of these little valentines you've distributed, but I'm fairly certain I'm the first man to whom you've given *two*."

Vorst started. He stared at the younger man with a keener, more direct interest, thrusting his eyes up close to the bitter face.

"Who are you?" he jerked out suddenly.

"Me? Haven't you recognized me yet? Well, I suppose fifteen years are apt to do a fairish bit of refashioning on a man's face. Still, I should have thought a man's own victim would have recognised him! I should have recognized you, Jaan Vorst, though I waited fifty years to find you again. Perhaps you recognize me now?"

Vorst studied him in silence for several seconds, his eyes, like black marbles, going over him restlessly, line by line.

"No," he said dully.

Maine smiled, a faint smile of tolerant remembrance. "Well, not to put too fine a point on it," he said, "I am your murderer. Quite; I am the man who murdered you. Odd, is it not? I don't suppose many murderers have had the privilege of chatting with their victims—years after the judge has donned the black cap."

He was looking hard at Vorst as he spoke. There was an airy easiness in his manner, but his eyes were blazing like blood-red agates and alive with a brilliance that was feverish.

Vorst, with a sick feeling of nausea in the pit of his stomach, suddenly realized that if he made one false move those granite-like hands would be at his throat like a streak of light, clawing the very life out of him.

"So you—you're Maine, are you?" he said, after a long exhalation of breath.

"Just that. And no more. A body with a name attached to it, by which men know it. All that is left of the clever young cub you sent away to the moors. The dried-up shell—with a brain still functioning up in its skull."

"So!"

"Very much so. You sent me to school, Vorst. You musn't complain if I've learned my lesson over-well. Fifteen years in one room is long enough for a man to master the whole thesis. I've leaned mine to beautiful perfection! I'll make every second of that fifteen years drip through your soul as it has dripped through mine. Like drops of boiling acid."

Vorst's answer had a significance that was typical. Without a word, without even a flicker of emotion, he put out his hand and took the Black Triangle from Maine's fingers. Then, very deliberately, he tore it slowly into a hundred tiny pieces and held them out flat on his hand far out over the parapet.

The fresh, keen wind of the morning caught them and took them off his palm in a fluttering stream. In a few seconds they were all gone and there was nothing left save a few specks of white, riding down the river.

It was a silent, calculated declaration of war—war to the knife.

"Like that, eh?" said Maine.

Vorst nodded. "I did not know you were Kellard Maine," he murmured. There was a cultivated suavity in his voice that made it sound like a gentle purr.

Maine was rubbing his mental hands again and the battle glints were high in his eyes.

"Scotland Yard gave me the air when I approached them on the matter the other day," he said. "They gave me the air and a large smile. But they won't do it again! Before two days are out I'll have Scotland Yard on my side. You are treading the maddest road that ever a man trod in his life, and you won't live to get to the end of it!"

"And why not?"

"Because I'm standing between you and it. Me—with a debt to pay! I owe you for all that I am now. A husk of a man, with only the bitterness of life left to me. All that is left is just the dry pod you see here—but a pod that contains one living core of hate—and neither you nor any of your yellow devils will ever obliterate it."

"Those are courageous words, Mr. Maine," Vorst sneered.

"I don't need courage; for the simple reason that I have no fear. Only the frightened man needs courage. Half your victims have died through fear—that poor brute who died in my arms up at Birkenhead had the fear of death in his soul long before your filthy germs twisted the life out of him. But you won't get me that way. I've had all the fear scorched out of me. I've stood in the dock and heard judgment of death passed over me. I've waited in the condemned cell day after day, wondering when the hangman was coming in to pinion me, knowing that every time the clock had turned it brought me an hour nearer to the gray dawn that has neither beginning nor end. And I waited in the silence of Dartmoor for fifteen dead years—just for the chance of finding you again. Time hasn't counted with me. Life itself has been timeless."

Vorst inclined his head the barest inch.

"I, too, have a cause at heart," he said. "Cause equally of hate! You will not find your task easy. Turn your head and look around. Of the score of people standing about here, eleven are watching *you!* I am not entirely friendless. And now, if you will allow me to pass, please? Thank you. It is not likely that we shall ever meet again."

Maine stepped aside, and Jaan Vorst, with his shoulders hunched and his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his huge coat, stalked sombrely away up the Embankment.

Dr. Hollis, with a nod of thanks and a pleasant good morning to the policemen, rejoined Maine.

"Well?" he said.

"It's not going to be easy," said Maine, with his eyes still on the sinister back view of the vanishing Vorst. "I knew it would be tough—but I must have altered the devil of a lot since he last saw me. He didn't know me from Adam—I had him cold, and I played him along step by step. But he never so much as gave me an inch, never batted an eyelid. I'm going to shadow the brute and find out where he goes to ground. You have a place in Harley Street, haven't you?"

"Yes. Here is my card."

"Thanks. I want to come along tonight and have a talk with you. You only have a skimming of the details of this yet. And I want to write out an entire account of the whole thing and leave it in your hands. Vorst may get me—and the authorities may wake up to the fact that there is something in my babblings when they find half the population of the kingdom suddenly going down with some inexplicable malady or other."

"Very well, my boy. Come round, say, about nine. Will that suit you?"

"Excellently. If you'll excuse me now, will you? I don't want to lose sight of Jaan Vorst. He's too tricky for my liking. I expect one of his thugs will be following me, but I can't help that."

Maine slipped unobtrusively away, and Dr. Hollis, with his head still very much in a whirl and the little imps of alarm crawling all over him, was alone on the pavement.

CHAPTER II

THE ICY HAND OF DEATH

KELLARD MAINE never kept that appointment. The nature of the circumstances that conspired against him was so urgent and so complicated that in no wise could he be held to blame. The sum total of them went to show that Jaan Vorst's declaration of war was no idle assumption of the inevitable, but a personal threat, potent with direct action from the moment it was made.

Maine followed the Eurasian right up to the far end of the Embankment. Round by Blackfriars he turned, where the mists hung low over the shipping down in the Pool, crossed the bridge and entered the maze of over-populated small streets that clutter away from the Old Ring.

Vorst seemed to have a perfect knowledge of his locality. He doubled and twisted about through narrow turnings and evil-smelling alleys like a striding automaton. He seemed oblivious of possible pursuit, never even turning his head to glance back, but just kept on at a steady stride that covered the ground at an astonishing pace. By eleven o'clock he was far down the river, stumping along through a litter of refuse left over from an early morning street market. Maine, loping along behind him, kept up a continual look-out. But not so much as a suspicion of a shadower showed up.

Suddenly Vorst turned into a veritable rabbit warren of crisscrossing alleys and cramped courts. The houses, two-storied brick-built slums in the last stages of dilapidation, herded close to each other, and the alleys between existed in a state of perpetual twilight. So faint was the light that here and there a permanent gas-jet flickered. They lit up the entrances to other squalid courts that were so dark that they looked like the openings of tunnels. Murk and gloom was part of the atmosphere.

Above one of the guttering lamps Maine caught sight of a painted name, *Frame Court.*

It was very faint and dirty, barely discernible. But Maine remembered that name with earnest conviction. For it was just as his eyes turned up to note the words that the sandbag impacted on his left temple.

It came without hint or warning, a sudden violent collision in his brain that sent a great blinding whiteness shooting across his eyes, a whiteness that was shot through and through with streaking slabs of red. He toppled as the blackness palled down about him.

Coincident with the soft thud of the bag, Vorst turned and walked slowly back. His face was set and unsmiling, like the face of Fate above the figure of Death. Ten seconds before that blow fell he had passed a greasy, dingy-looking window, set in the angle of a wall. The window was slightly contradictory. It looked as though it had never been opened for years. Dirt and grime were thickly encrusted in the joints; the glass itself was frosted with an age-old layer of it. Eyes had been waiting behind that window, as they always did when Vorst walked abroad; slant eyes.

Vorst had made a sign as he passed that window. Nothing which was noticeable; just a mere twitching up of the lips—and the watching eyes blinked once in response.

And as Maine drew abreast of it, the window opened soundlessly on hinges that moved in a bath of oil. A lean, olive-skinned arm slid out with the sandbag gripped in the fingers. The bag cracked against his skull as Maine raised his eyes to the painted name.

"Bring him along," said Vorst.

The other man leaped through the window, and was followed, with snake-like agility, a moment later, by a second. The two of them picked Maine up like a sack of flour and carried him down the dark flight of steps immediately beneath the flickering gas-jet. One of them kicked open a heavy door and they took him through.

The air struck chill and cold inside; there was a dampness in it as though a thousand tides had ebbed and flowed through the silences there since humans last set foot in its mouldering ways.

They took him down yet more steps and along a network of pitch black passages through which the sound of running water percolated like the faint sound of a hidden waterfall coming up from some black cavern in the earth. Not a glimmer of light shone anywhere. Apparently the two carriers had no need of it, for they followed the twistings and turnings of the Stygian tunnels with unfailing ease and precision.

The farther they progressed the chillier and clammier became the air. It was like being in an ice well, except that there was no freshness about the smell of the place. It was all dank, like a tropical fever swamp that had suddenly gone cold.

Vorst opened a door that was flush tight at the joints all round. The two Orientals pushed their burden inside and withdrew, their footsteps sounding back along the dismal corridors long after they had gone.

Maine came to, with a cracking headache, an hour later. He felt as though a great iron rivet were driven through his head from temple to temple. From somewhere in the utter blackness around he heard Vorst's voice, a gentle monody that came to him out of nowhere.

"You are there, Kellard Maine? Ah, I hear you moving. I beg of you to listen well, for I have not much time to spend with you. It is possible that your friend is already dead. In any case, he has not long to live. Perhaps no longer than you. The Black Triangle is all round you. There is food, here, which you will eat—or starve. There is water here, which you will drink—or die of thirst. There is air here, which you will breathe—or suffocate. All three are poisoned. You will die—as your friend in Birkenhead died. Goodbye!"

The voice ceased speaking. Footsteps retreated up the dark approaches, and Maine was alone in a death-like silence.

FOR some seconds he did not move. He was too dizzily numb. A semi-miasma had taken possession of his brain and body. His head was whirling and buzzing like a steam-saw, and he was experiencing a physical nausea as though he had just swallowed a quart of strong salt water, hot. His left temple was a three-inch compress of concentrated ache, badly bruised and maddeningly painful to the touch.

The last sound faded back in the impenetrable corridors and the silence became overbearing, a burden to his straining eardrums. It seemed to grow heavier and, in some queer way, linked up and involved with the darkness.

And that darkness was a bewildering thing. It hung in the air, part of the very fabric of it. It was not so much a darkness as a sheer, unyielding absence of light—something born of the uttermost powers of midnight.

That was all there was in that utter blackout of a world, the silence and the darkness. And . . . and surely there was something more, something which was part of both, engendered of one and augmenting the horror of the other. His fuddled brain tried to come

to grips with it, tried to wrestle it down to a reality. But his mind was groping through a blackness as overpowering as that in the cellar.

A single drop of water fell ponderously from the roof into a pool on the floor.

Ah, yes! That's what it was, the slow dripping of isolated water-drops drops that fell with a plump little flop into unseen pools in the darkness. No, it wasn't, though; it was something much more fragile than that, something much more vague. Something ethereal, it seemed.

He conceived the odd whimsy that it was the echo of Jaan Vorst's cold voice still echoing about in the chambers of his memory. But he could scarcely remember what that voice had said. So it could hardly be that. It was something shockingly malignant—that was all he could pin his brain down to believing. The voice itself had seemed unreal. It had come to him faintly, as though through endless space from a sphere that was lost in the distant back blocks of Time. And it had registered only partially on his torpid reception.

He put out his hand and touched a wall, a stone wall, clammy and cold. It was wet to his fingers and there was a grim feeling of water-worn slime about it. That cellar, he conjectured, was full of water more often than it was empty. On the other side was just a black emptiness.

His brain began to pick up its functions again, one by one. More definite memories came back, and he got a firmer hold of his sense of touch. He found himself lying flat on his back on a raised stone slab, or a flat bench of stones, he couldn't see which. It was brutally uncomfortable, and the hard corners were digging harshly into his flesh.

And then that other little complexity was elucidated for him. He discovered for himself the mystery of that diaphanous sound that was stabbing red-hot messages of warning through him. It was the faint, hissing escape of vapour somewhere up there in the pressing darkness. The warnings intensified and hammered at him for response.

Kellard Maine sat up with a jerk. He felt hurriedly for his torch. His fingers were deathly cold, and for a little while he failed to manipulate the snap-catch. When he did get it down, a thin, clear pencil of light shot out and illumined a circular yard patch on the opposite wall. He flashed it round swiftly, noting the chief features of his prison as the little beam routed the darkness.

He was in what looked to be a fairly large cellar. It was massively solid, built of great blocks of weathered stone. The only break in the square flatness of the walls was the door. It was set back a few inches, in an aperture framed in steel. He himself had been lying on an oblong pile of stone setts that were stacked against the wall at the far end, like a solid platform four feet high. It had been used at some time as a working bench. Maine was puzzled at first to understand why a bench should not be made of wood. But then he remembered that the most notable attribute of stone is that it does not float on immersion.

He clambered off the stones and went over to inspect the door. There was one point at least about it which stood out bold and clear. The thing was as water-tight as a boiler.

The door itself was of steel, and it fitted into its frame with the complete perfection of a piston-head into a cylinder. The contact was so rigidly precise that nothing short of high internal compression could have caused a leakage through the joints.

He turned back to the stone setts. At the bottom end of the bench was a bowl full of food—bread, butter, cheese and a great chunk of corned beef. Standing by it was a beaker of water with a tin dipper hanging from the rim. He flashed the torch upwards and searched across the roof foot by foot.

The roof was high—he estimated it at twenty feet—and his torch was barely strong enough to throw its light as far as that. It was not until a long five minutes had passed that he succeeded in locating the elusive sound of escaping gas. It was right across in the corner by the door. After endless searching he detected its source, a thin, shining nozzle, almost as fine as the needle of a hypodermic syringe, projecting into the room through a crevice in the masonry.

Then he remembered Vorst's parting harangue: "There is food here, which you will eat—or starve; water, which you will drink—or die of thirst; air, which you will breathe—or suffocate."

And the knowledge thundered across his awakening brain that he was in a death-trap of creeping poisons. The food, the drink, the very air he was breathing, were impregnated with the diabolical horrors which Vorst had been cultivating for years. It was pumping down into that room steadily and inexorably. Already the atmosphere was vitiated; he could smell a thin, nebulous sweetness in the air, an odour that struck his mind back in a flash to the old Slaughter-house days.

Chlorine! The deadliest of all the invisible gases. That was the foul, agonising doom that was hissing into the room from somewhere far out of reach.

HE SURVEYED the whole desperate situation in a single lightning review. The desperation of it galvanised him into action. The next second Kellard Maine, with his coat off and flung away behind him, was working like a maniac. He attacked the great slab of stones with a frenzy that was born of his own precious desire to live. He converted himself into a rabidly animated steam navvy, transporting the hundredweight blocks of granite from the heap and stacking them up against the wall under the death-spraying nozzle. Ten minutes of Herculean effort saw the stack rising, a solid pyramid against the wall.

The labour of it was tremendous, for he carried them over two at a time and often he was working in pitch darkness. The perspiration was standing out over his face in hot beads, and his limbs were clammy with it. His heart was pumping like a trip hammer, and the breath was coming and going through his teeth in short gasps. But the stack went on rising, without a halt, without a break.

Maine, during that convulsive period, was thanking the gods that made him for the fierce, stalwart fitness the life in the quarries had grained into him. Strength, virility and the power to last out were driven into his fibres, welded into the stuff of his bone. He toiled on without respite, forcing himself to a task that seemed to be cracking his very muscles.

His shins were raw and bleeding from continued falls down the pyramid as he staggered up with a block under each arm. His clothing was torn, and his bruised head hummed as though it would burst. But ever that cone mounted higher up the wall. The torch kept going out in his twitching fingers, and the fouled air made his head reel. But there came the time when Maine, with a water-soaked handkerchief tied tight round his mouth, crawled up the pile of granite for the last time.

He balanced the two great slabs on the summit, and, straining up to his full height, found he could just reach the nozzle. He tried to bend a kink in it and so choke the ingress of gas, but the tube was made of hardened steel and he only succeeded in snapping an inch off the end of it. He tried to plug it with a match, but the wood was too soft, and after a few seconds it blew out again and the gas came hissing in just as steadily as it ever had.

He took out his revolver, tipped out a cartridge and bit the bullet out of it. It was a Webley, and the bullet was of soft lead, rounded at the head. Holding the pellet against the stump of the broken nozzle, he began to tap it gently with the butt end of the gun.

With a gasp of relief he saw that it was working. His arms were aching with the strain, and his tendons felt as though they were going to flex up into great bulging knots at any moment, but he hammered away until the plug was complete. The outer rim of the bullet suddenly slipped right up over the nozzle, leaving its core plugged into the tube as firmly as a cork in a bottle of wine. The devilish hissing had ceased.

He took off his handkerchief and wrung the water out of it. The air was clearer up there. Chlorine is a heavy gas, and it was lying thickest on the floor. Maine sat down on the top of the cone to think things out. He mopped his streaming face and pumped down great lungsful of air.

He shone his torch across and took a quieter, less frenzied survey. The most urgent danger had been eliminated; the poisons in the food could wait till he had forged a way of escape from that cellar on the anvil of his own wits.

It was obvious from the evidence lying all around that the place had been used by Jaan Vorst for some of his more dangerous experiments. Certain species of bacteria thrive best in a cold, wet atmosphere, and Maine was quickly convinced that he had been brought to an incubating centre for those types of bacilli. There were great heaps of glass tubes in the space laid bare by the removal of the stones. Vorst had evidently pushed them off his bench from time to time as their contents were developed and taken away for use elsewhere. It was possible, he thought, that the water was only pumped out when Vorst wanted to feed them. At other times the whole cellar was flooded, leaving the bacteria in its natural element to propagate and multiply.

He knew, the moment his brain had begun to function again, that the place was floodable. That was obvious from the green slime that covered the walls, the pools of still water on the floor and the dank, foetid stench that hung over the place. But what he couldn't make out was how the water got in from the outside. He thought perhaps the cellar was on the tide margin of the river and that the place flooded automatically with every rise of the tide and drained away with the ebb.

But Kellard Maine did not know down how many flights of steps the yellow men had carried him. In reality he was far below the level of the Thames at its lowest, thirty feet below the lowest limits of its tidal flow. That

room could be flooded at will, no matter what the state of the tide. The opening of a sluice elsewhere in that rabbit warren of interlocking passages and cellars allowed the water to rise slowly in the great chamber, higher and higher until the roof itself was awash. It welled up through the crevices in the floor and was pumped away by the same exits.

The great slab of stone had been one of Vorst's working benches. At an earlier time there had been thousands of glass bottles there, each one alive and crawling with the myriad germs of death. New and more horrible ways of eliminating life had been created in those bottles with every week that passed. Those bottles housed whole armies of death, battalions of it, impies of it, all lying there in readiness for the master stroke of the master poisoner.

But the bottles were all gone. They had been removed to that great central laboratory of his that reared its ominous bulk elsewhere on the gloomy waterfront of old London River—the laboratory that had but one entrance, and that by water. The great day was approaching its dawn!

Maine dropped his torch in a crevice among the stone setts so that its light fell full on the foodstuffs at the end.

Butter, bread, cheese and corned beef; it was all made-up food—food that had passed through various preparatory processes before getting into the market. These were the foods which Vorst was operating on. Huge mixings of such products as these were to be infected at the source. There, in front of him, were samples of the identical methods Vorst proposed using.

And Maine badly wanted specimens to take away with him. Here was evidence in plenty for Dr. Hollis to take to the sceptical police. Hollis could take them and get a full analysis in that other great government laboratory of which he was chief.

He pulled out his watch and studied it ruefully. It was a good one; a solid gold case, the product of one of the finest watchmakers in the world. It had been one of his first purchases after leaving the battlemented hell on the moors; the salesman spent much time in demonstrating to him how impossible it was for that watch either to lose or gain a single second, no matter what unusual conditions were imposed upon it. But to Kellard Maine, at the moment, its greatest and noblest quality was that the case was watertight.

Without a regret he opened it and carefully dismantled the works. Springs, screws, ratchets, cogs, wheels, they all came out one after the other till the case was a mere golden shell. Then with a pocketknife he sliced off little cubes of beef, bread and cheese and wrapped them up in a clean sheet of paper torn from his pocketbook. He buttered the paper thoroughly and pressed the little packet into the watchcase. The little kinks and crannies he filled with a thimbleful of water taken out of the beaker. Then he closed the case firmly and slipped it back into his pocket.

Slinking footsteps sounded on the stone floor outside, and Maine went as rigid as a statue. A rush of thoughts swept through his mind. At first he thought it was Jaan Vorst come back; but he dismissed that immediately. They were not Vorst's footsteps.

WHOEVER it was, he was aproaching slowly, a step at a time, with a halt between each, as though he was listening for sounds of movement in the locked cellar. Maine's brow cleared. He understood. It was his gaoler, coming down to investigate the sudden stoppage of the chlorine-gas pump. Some special telltale up there in his own room had told him that the deadly gas was no longer hissing into the cellar.

With infinite caution Maine crawled back up the heap of stones again. He got almost to the top and stood there, balancing himself in the semi-darkness with one of the great setts poised in his hands. The footsteps approached, a soft shuffle of thin leather across the damp stones. They got to the door, and there was a long pause. Minute after minute ticked by in a deathly silence. Then there came a faint knocking on the steel door. Maine neither answered nor made a sound. The knocking was repeated. It grew louder and the man outside began to call questions at him. It was more of a querulous squeak than a shout—the high-pitched, metallic accent of the East. Maine couldn't decipher a word of what he said, but he guessed its purport.

A little later there came the faint sound of three muffled clicks from a point in the frame of the door. The door itself began to open, slowly, and with exaggerated caution. A shining revolver appeared round the angle, close gripped in a skinny yellow hand. The gaoler was taking no chances.

A moment or two later his face appeared, a look of puzzled surprise creasing long furrows across his shining forehead. He peered furtively in, sliding his head forward inch by inch to investigate the strange phenomenon of the shifted stones. Maine was invisible to him, high up there in the shadows. To the Oriental, a miracle had happened, a miracle that evidenced itself in the demolition

of a huge slab of hundredweight stones and its reconstruction elsewhere, a faint glow of light from a crack in those same stones and the complete and inexplicable disappearance of his prisoner.

That last item was the most bewildering of all. The look of surprise on his face increased to one of utter incredulity. He stooped low to the floor and sniffed. A thin, sweet smell assailed his nostrils. Apparently the chlorine *had* been coming into the room earlier. He glanced up towards the summit of the stone-heap and his torch flicked upward. And as his eyes twisted up he opened his mouth to yell. A great stone sett was within a foot of his head.

The yell never came. He hadn't even time to dodge. A hundredweight of granite crashed into his face and burst his flesh. It was followed a hundredth of a second later by Maine himself, falling solid on the collapsing figure. He had jumped, all-standing, the moment he sent the great block of stone hurtling downward. He landed full on the guard's neck, his knees gripping round the bony shoulders and his fingers snapping in a vise-like clutch on the windpipe.

The gaoler went down without a sound, without even the murmur of a sigh. Maine was on top of him and all tangled up with him. He struggled to free himself of the clinging limbs, and as he scrambled to his feet there came just the merest whisper of sound from the doorway—and then three soft clicks.

Maine wheeled with a gasp. The door had closed; he was still a prisoner, cooped up in a poison-ridden atmosphere with an unconscious Oriental as his sole companion. He jumped across to the door and tried to get it open. But there was no hope there. The thing was flush with the wall, and there was no hand-hold. Closer inspection showed that neither was there any semblance of a keyhole. There was only one way to open that door, and that was from the outside. Added to which, it closed and locked itself automatically.

"Phew!" he muttered, and thoughtfully smoothed his throbbing temple. "This looks as if it would develop into a war of attrition. The only snag is that the supply of yellow devils is likely to last longer than my ability to knock 'em out! In which case. . . ."

He broke off and set to work, quietly and methodically. He gave himself five to ten minutes' grace. After that time he felt it reasonable to presume that the gaoler's partner would become suspicious and come down to make a few inquiries for himself.

He tipped all the bullets out of his gun and broke out the leaden heads, tipping out the little strings of yellow cordite into a neat heap. Then he hauled the unconscious body up on to the pyramid and searched it. There were seven cartridges in the gaoler's gun, and a box of twelve others in a loose pocket. Maine took possession of them all and treated them in the same way as his own. When he had finished he had a whole matchbox full of cordite, tight-packed in close layers.

He took the whole lot across to the far end wall and found a crevice in the masonry deep enough to take it. He poked it as far up as he could, ramming it in with the muzzle of his gun. Then he greased a match thoroughly with poisoned butter and thrust it in through the lid of the box, with the sulphur head downwards. He lit the match at the top, plugged up the crevice with his sodden handkerchief and piled a couple of huge stones against it.

Then in a wild scramble he made an attempt to shelter himself behind the pyramid of granite blocks. He got as far as the angle of safety thrown by the rake of the blocks when the thing went off. There was an abrupt, startling flash of white light that seemed to change instantly into a lurid chromy yellow. And then a detonation so tremendous in a confined space that he felt as though the eardrums had been ripped out of his head. He was flung violently against the piled-up stones and his injured temple sustained another jarring crack. A dry, hot press of wind pushed against him with the force of a steam engine, and the handkerchief blew back past his head and hit the wall like a stone. And then the water began to pour into the cellar.

Maine stared at it for a moment in utter stupefaction; and then he made a frantic grab at the torch. The beam chased across to the broken wall. There was a breach in it about a yard around. Five huge slabs had been blown bodily out and the ends of two or three others had gone. Through the great hole a cataract of black water poured, huge, tremendous, like the outfall of a storm-water sewer into a river after heavy floods. It thundered into the cellar in a solid mass. Almost before he had got over the shock of the concussion it was up to his knees; before he got the light focussed it was waist high. Ten seconds later Maine was swimming for his life, striking out like a dog in the swirling water, holding the light high above the flood in his upflung hand.

He was flung about like a cork in the seething vortex, whirling round the walls one

moment, cannoning against the pile of stones as he swept by, spinning like a gyroscope in the centre the next. The water rose, and with it, Maine. Soon his upraised hand was touching the roof. He held onto a broken brick and steadied himself, taking his last bearings before the light went out. The rush of incoming water was directly underneath him, throwing his legs up horizontally—and he gripped on there for dear life. He let the torch go and it sank down, visible dimly in the water before it blackened out. The inky darkness of ultimate night dropped down again like the slamming of a door.

His head bumped on the roof. A last convulsive effort to maintain his equilibrium and the water was over his mouth. He prayed to the gods of his destiny to flood the rest of the cellar quickly. He had realised what that chaotic inrush of water meant. It was Thames water that was swirling in from beyond the wall. The cellar was under the river itself; the wall was probably part of the foundation system of a wharf or a warehouse built on the river front. He had estimated the inrush as two inches per second. But as it neared the top it slowed down considerably. The pressure inside was creating an air lock and keeping the water out. And that air was drenched with agonishing death, impregnated with all the corrosive elements of chlorine. Maine was underwater ten seconds before he felt the inrush slacken and fall away.

AS SOON as the whirling motion slowed he offered up a sudden prayer and dived. He had been floating directly over the wall-breach: he dived perpendicularly. His wildly working fingers found the opening and he plunged himself through. With an acrobatic twist he doubled upwards and strained up towards the air. There was a greeny-brown gloom all around him, growing lighter and lighter as he shot upward. The blood was drumming in his head; he could feel each heartbeat bumping on his injured temple, and his chest felt as though it were being crushed between giant rollers. He shut his eyes and strained to hold his gasping lung muscles in check.

All in a sudden dazzling moment he shot above the surface, bobbing half out of the water with the velocity of his rise. He struck out aimlessly, blindly. In that moment he had opened his eyes—and he shut them again with a ferocious snap. After the staggering blackness of the cellar, the clear bright light of the sunshine seemed to scorch the retinas of his eyes, to hit them with a white-hot iron.

He gasped and plunged about in the water like a hooked cod, gulping the air down as fast as his lungs would take it. A seaman on a tug bawled a stentorian shout across the waters.

Dimly he heard the swish of a boat approaching, a soft hissing sound like the steady tearing of silk.

"Hold on a moment, old chap. I'll be with you in half a jiff." Without opening his eyes he began to tread water and faced round in the direction of the voice. It was the most delicious music he had ever heard in his life. It was a girl's voice, soft and deliciously feminine; it fell on his ears like the echo of silver bells played on a summer's evening. There was music in it, the real music that dwells alone in the sweet throat of a woman.

Maine heard the powerful thresh of a propeller thrown suddenly into reverse and the water boiled around him. It ceased suddenly as a pair of capable young hands fastened tightly on his collar.

"Now you're all right, old chap. Don't get excited. Just get your breath, and then help me to get you inboard."

Maine grasped up at the gunwale of the motorboat and hung on. He did not want to open his eyes after that. Such a delightful voice as hers could never fail to be matched by anything save the face of an angel of loveliness. Anything short of absolute perfection of features would have been like a blow in the eyes after such a voice as that. Maine smiled a grim sort of mental grin to himself. It was odd, he thought, getting an idea like that into his head after scraping out of a death-clutch by something less than the skin of his teeth.

But for fifteen years he had been denied the sight of womanhood. For fifteen timeless years only the remembrance and the vision of them had been left to him. He had carried thought pictures of them just up under his eyelids, beautiful pictures of loveliness. They had helped to preserve his reason while the years ticked slowly by over his head. And that voice might have belonged to just such a delicious creature as he had imagined through the years of silence.

He opened his eyes and looked up at her, with the water flopping about under his chin and her face close to his as she held him. He drew in a long reverent sigh. The face so near to his was very lovely, very gloriously lovely. It was like the beautiful animation of one of the marvelous miracles the old masters used to paint.

He closed his eyes again. He wanted to remember that vision just as it was. He was quite sure it would be dreadfully altered when he opened them again.

Then he heard her say, and the charm of her voice cut through him, "Here comes a police boat. You'll be all right now. They will take charge of you."

Then he looked at her suddenly, with wild alarm in his eyes.

"Miss—for God's sake don't let them get me. Think of something; tell them something—anything. They will detain me for inquiries—and I can't explain. Get me out of this—for heaven's sake!"

The vision in the boat looked at Maine in utter astonishment.

"I—I beg your pardon?" she said blankly.

Maine's case was desperate. Circumstances had conspired to tie him up in knots. There was no time to invent credible explanations, no time even to fence—that motorboat was careering towards them at a terrific pace. Screwing his head round, he could see it. There was a hissing white bow-wave creaming over and over at her forefoot, and the stuttering drone of her engine was loud and insistent. She was going all out.

He hooked his armpit over the gunwale and hauled himself up in the water. Then, cupping his free hand to his mouth, he shouted, "Hi! Motorboat! Stand Away! You're spoiling the film!"

"Hi?" bawled a stentorian voice in irascible surprise.

"You're duffing five hundred feet of film! Get out!"

"Sorry!"

The police boat shied round like a startled horse and swished off downstream for a hundred yards before slowing down. It cruised about in the offing till Maine, with a kick and a heave, hauled himself on board and flopped down, all dripping with water, against the engine-house.

The vision looked at him without speaking. Hatless, panting, trickling water at every pore, his hair all matted and a great smirch of black grease across his face, he cut a sorry picture. The whole thing was so bizarre, it had all happened at such a breakneck pace, that she was too dumbfounded to speak. The amazing apparition from the depths of the water was calmly feeling in his pockets, fumbling in each one in turn, with his head thrust down to keep the stinging water from his eyes.

She felt herself warming to this extraordinary visitant of hers. He had nerve, anyway! Nerve enough to take the edge off a razor blade.

"Cigarette?" she queried.

He shook his head.

"A match, perhaps?"

"No, thank you. I don't smoke."

Without another word and with her lips pressed into a very prim, straight little line, she started up the motor again, pushed in the clutch and resumed her place on the tiller seat.

The man from nowhere had found what he was searching for. A gold watch. He took it from his pocket, wiped it dry on a piece of oily waste and opened it. Inside, instead of works, was a tiny little packet done up in paper. There was water in it, too! Water which he was careful not to spill.

That much she saw, and her bewilderment increased. She looked at him with a new curiosity. A bedraggled young man, with a tanned, resolute face, and hands that looked to be capable of doing anything. And perhaps not so young after all. No; his body looked youngish somehow. There were agile, virile lines about it, a resiliency and fitness that was forged in the crucible of clean youth; but the face was older. It was worn, set with the stony patience of the Sphinx, and the deep-cut lines in it gave it the maturer characteristics that only come when the thirties are left behind. She noted all that in a quick, searching scrutiny—and her interest grew. He was reliable, was that fine-featured, young-old man. Every look and line of him spelled dependability.

SATISFIED with his inspection, he carefully closed his watch case again and put it back in his hip pocket.

"Are those your rations?" she asked, with a forced little smile.

Maine looked at her, hard and direct.

"They *were!*" he said. "We will now, if you have no objection, change the topic."

Her eyebrows went up with a tiny little twitch. He was certainly very blunt. And yet, somehow, that was exactly the kind of answer she had expected from the way those steel-hard eyes had looked at her.

He wriggled himself into a comfortable position against the engine-house, wrung the water out of his handkerchief and carefully wiped his face.

"And handsome, too," she admitted as the disfiguring blotch of oil disappeared.

"Have you any special destination in view?" he asked her after a little while.

"Is there anywhere you would like me to take you?" she parried.

"I haven't the vaguest idea." He was abnormally frank about it. He said it as though he were pondering in his mind just what would be best for him to do. Her eyebrows puckered. Really, he was a most unusual man.

There was another difficult little silence.

She broke it by saying, with just the slightest note of embarrassment, "Then don't you think you have some sort of an explanation to make to me?"

"That," admitted Maine, "is just the trouble. I'm trying to think out a suitable sheaf of fairy tales. When I say suitable, I mean something that would sound credible—and I can't think of anything that would ring true."

"Is it necessary to tell me lies?"

"Yes, it is, rather. You see, if I told you the truth you wouldn't believe me. It's too fiercely unreal to be true. I'm not sure that I can believe it all myself."

"I should believe anything *you* told me," she answered pointedly.

"Oh! Why?"

"You don't look to me to be the kind of man who would tell lies uselessly. Lying is a difficult accomplishment for you. Your eyes, now, they have the boldest look of truth in them of any I know. Your mouth, too; yours is no liar's mouth."

Maine sat back and looked at her. She certainly was an alluring creature. She was a little flushed just then; the piquancy of the adventure had tingled her blood, but it was obvious that her coloring was very perfect under more normal conditions. It was the deliciously soft pink of old Dresden china. Her eyebrows were neat brown pencillings that struck two perfect curves above her eyes—eyes that boasted a bewildering glory of lashes. And her lips were sweet and dainty as Lenten roses. The whole was a poem of features—a proud, sweet head set on a proud, arching neck. "There," she added, "you'd never tell a lie—the way you are looking now."

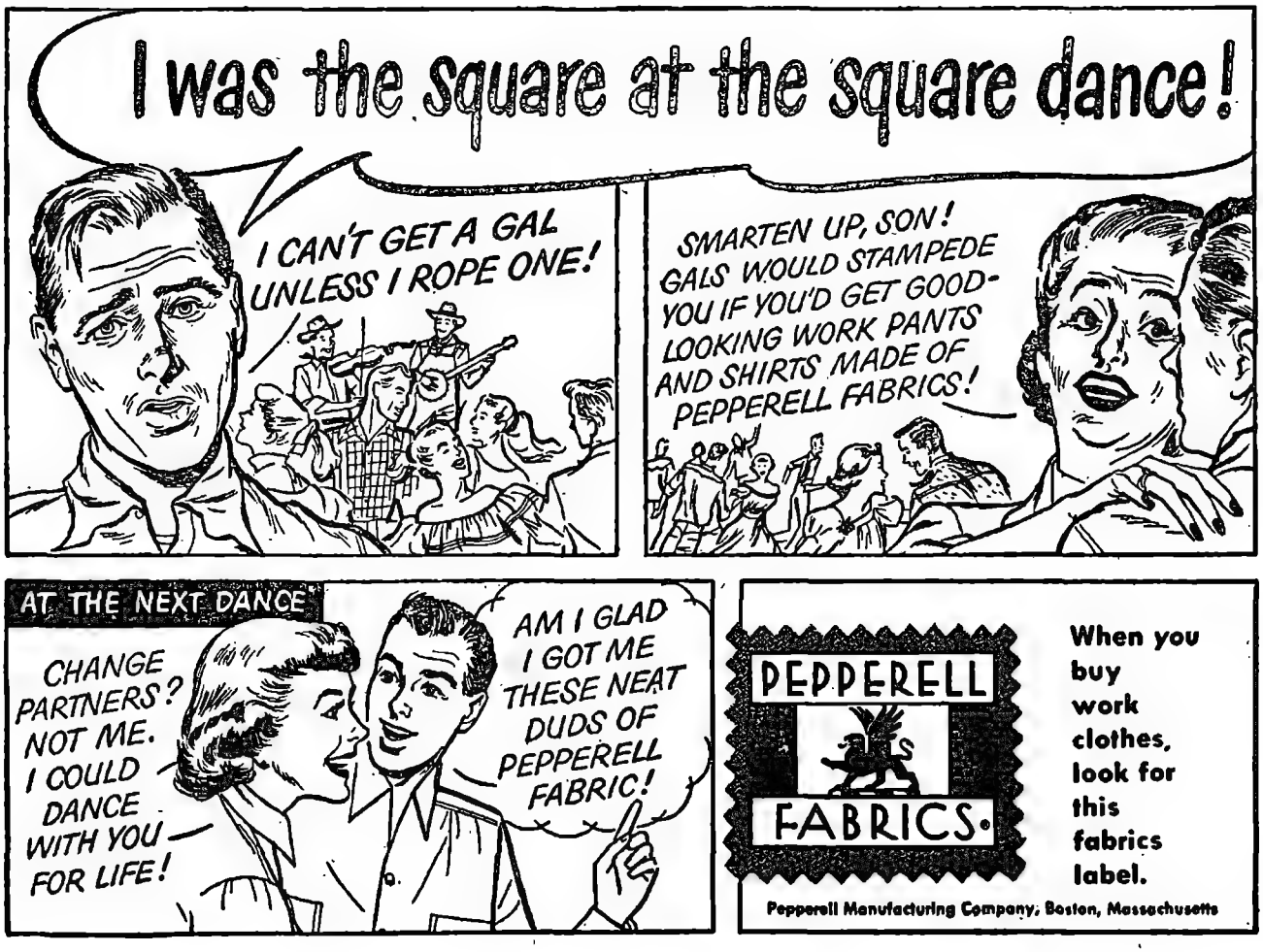
Maine was conscious of a warm flush mounting all over him, and a feeling he could never hope to analyse sent the blood racing through him. To be spoken to like that, by the most bewitchingly beautiful creature he had ever seen in his life, was a wholly luxurious experience. The golden voice had sincerity in every note of it. The realisation of that only made him the more uncomfortable. Kellard Maine had been denied the soft contact of the feminine touch too long.

"It is very charming of you to say a thing like that to me," he said. And for the first time in fifteen years there was a shade of wistfulness in his voice.

"Is it? Aren't you used to hearing women saying nice things about you?"

"N-no!" said Maine dully.

"You surprise me." The vision inspected a perfectly manicured finger-nail. "I should have thought most women would have been


I was the square at the square dance!
I CAN'T GET A GAL UNLESS I ROPE ONE!
SMARTEN UP, SON! GALS WOULD STAMPEDE YOU IF YOU'D GET GOOD-LOOKING WORK PANTS AND SHIRTS MADE OF PEPPERELL FABRICS!
AT THE NEXT DANCE
CHANGE PARTNERS? NOT ME. I COULD DANCE WITH YOU FOR LIFE!
AM I GLAD I GOT ME THESE NEAT DUDS OF PEPPERELL FABRIC!
PEPPERELL
FABRICS
When you buy work clothes, look for this fabrics label.
Pepperell Manufacturing Company, Boston, Massachusetts

rather keen on your type. You aren't an actor, are you?"

"I'm sorry—no!"

"I thought not. You have the cast of head: and there are certain ways about you, too, which rather incline to make one associate you with the theatre—but there's something more solid, something more original in you than is to be found in the general run of stagy men."

"You seem to know them fairly well. Do you speak from experience?"

She brushed the question aside with regal authority.

"Aren't you feeling frightfully cold? That water must be perishing."

"No. I'm a naturally cold-blooded mortal."

"Well, perhaps you will tell me what I am to do with you? Obviously, I cannot go on running you up and down the Thames forever. Equally obviously, you must go somewhere. The point is, where?"

Maine ran his fingers through his wet, tangled hair.

"This conversation is really getting most dreadfully difficult," he said. "It's impossible for me to go on talking to you like this without knowing your name. To call you Madam would be ludicrous. To call you Miss would to too utterly cheap for words. And anything else would be an impertinence."

"You certainly ought to be on the stage, my dear sir. Conquests to you would be ten a penny. My name is Warden, Coralie Warden. You may have seen my name about, somewhere or other."

Maine stared. "Coralie Warden, the great contralto?" he gasped.

She smiled faintly. "The Nightingale of Ten Capitals," she said. "A resonant title, is it not? Please don't blame me for it. My agent is entirely responsible. Said I needed a slogan that would hit people right up under their hats, something that would stick there after the hair had fallen out. 'The Nightingale of Ten Capitals' was the result. He called it a nifty; seemed to think he had achieved an astounding intellectual triumph. Perhaps he has. Millions more people know that I am the 'Nightingale of Ten Capitals' than have ever heard me sing. Extraordinary people, those publicity men. Won't you tell me who you are? I'm quite sure you are somebody famous; and I've been trying to think who you are."

"I'm sorry, Miss Warden, but I shall have to disabuse you. You have never seen me before and I am not famous. At least, not yet. I shall be horribly famous though, one day. Depressingly so."

"I'm quite sure you will."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, you just look that sort of man, that's all. You are cut out for fame. The atmosphere of leadership is all over you. You couldn't travel with the mob for a single mile."

"Well, my name is Kellard Maine."

"That, of course, conveys nothing to me."

"Naturally. You would have been only about ten years old when my name was last known to the general public."

"But what are you?"

"Briefly, a doctor, struck off the rolls, a murderer, condemned and reprieved, and an ex-convict out on ticket-of-leave." He pushed the words out with flat deliberation. They were icy and distinct, like brittle pellets dropping in a tin.

But she glanced away from him with seeming disinterest. "I would not have thought humour of that brand would have appealed to you," she said.

"My humble apologies," said Maine quietly. "You don't think it funny?"

"I do not," she replied a little curtly.

"Neither do I. I never have thought it funny. On my own behalf I may also say that neither have I ever thought it tragic. I haven't got down to self-pity yet. That may come later. Up to now the only emotion I have been able to register is just plain hate! No, it hasn't been funny, Miss Warden—only nasty, that's all."

CORALIE WARDEN turned and looked at him with eyes growing wider.

"But—but surely you are joking!" she said.

"Listen, Miss Warden. I've never heard *you* sing. I've never even heard a mechanical reproduction of your voice!"

Coralie's fingers were twitching nervously on the tiller.

"That's how long I've been away out of life. There is nothing, in all the universe of civilisation, quite so remote as the silence of the moors. I am not joking. But it's odd that you, who were but a moment ago finding praise for the truth you saw in my face, should discredit the first personal truth I speak. You wish to dump me ashore now, don't you?"

"Not—not because of that," said Coralie hurriedly. "But you will—you'll be taking a bad attack of pneumonia if you hang about in your wet clothes any longer."

"I don't think so. I'm more or less pickled to climatic vagaries. If you will bear with me just a few minutes longer I shall be eternally in your debt. Not that I am not hopelessly your debtor already—you have just done me a service I could never hope to

repay—but I have a good deal to do before I can get back to my hotel for a change of dry clothing."

The pulse-rippling little adventure had lost its glamour for Coralie. It was one thing suddenly to rescue a handsome man from almost certain death in the tide-rips below the Pool and to get him ashore despite the alertness and noisy attentions of the water-police; but it was decidedly another thing to find herself sharing boatroom with a self-confessed murderer, who, moreover, confessed to it without turning a hair. Murder to her, of course, was the most shockingly brutal crime in the decalogue.

"You're not frightened I'm going to jump up and murder you, are you?" he asked, with a dry smile.

"I don't think so." Coralie laughed. "I don't even believe you are a murderer."

"I'm not," admitted Maine.

Coralie halted and regarded him again with a nettled frown.

"Then would you please mind telling me why you gave me such a wholly unpleasant moment just now?" she demanded.

"I never said I *was* a murderer," observed Maine coolly. "I merely said that as such I was condemned and reprieved. No more than that. You see, it was all so disarmingly simple. A body was fished up out of a river. Certain evidences upon it went to prove that the corpse, whoever it was, had died violently. And a lot of clever people dressed themselves up in wigs and gowns, cackled a lot of bilge at each other and came to the unanimous conclusion that I had done it. So they sent me to prison for fifteen years."

"But—what a ghastly thing." Coralie's voice was profoundly shocked. Her face had drained as white as her handkerchief. And it was obvious that her feelings were genuine.

"Oh, no, no! Nothing tragic about it—please! Just plain hellish, that's all. I wouldn't have mentioned it except that you suggested I owed you an explanation. Which I certainly do. But I balked at it because, as I said, the true explanation sounds rather like drawing a quixotically lengthy bow. But then, things being as they are, you were entitled to enlightenment of some sort. And so I told you the truth, as bluntly as the facts could be embraced in words."

"And—and you were actually innocent! Or, you poor soul!" The thought seemed to appall her, to stick in her mental throat and choke her.

"Well, yes, perhaps it was a bit of a mix-up. As a matter of fact, they crabbed the whole thing as thoroughly as possible. They got hold of the wrong murderer and the wrong corpse. Otherwise it was a fairly well conducted case. Still, let us forget it. It doesn't explain how I came to be down there in the river, does it?"

Coralie shook her head, still dumbly trying to comprehend the misery the man had been through.

"I had been having a confidential chat with the man I murdered fifteen years ago. Odd that he should still be living, isn't it? Pity I can't prove it's the same man—but I suppose we all have our quaint little crosses to bear."

"Where did you—where did you jump from?" asked Coralie, striving to turn the conversation. "There are no bridges here, and I could not see any boats near you that you could have fallen from."

"I know. I came up from underneath. And if you hadn't turned up when you did, I should have had as near a squeak as ever I've had in my life. And then there was the police boat, too. I should have been in dreadful difficulties—it's so difficult for a man out on ticket-of-leave to satisfy the police with explanations of how he came to get into the river. I never can thank you enough for that."

"Please don't talk about thanking me. I'm only too thankful to know I was passing along this way."

"What brings you so far downstream, by the way? One does not often see delightful ladies past Millwall."

"This is my usual morning's run, when the weather is fine. One sees so much of Kew and Richmond and the glories of Hampton Court. I think I prefer this end of it, down among the great ships and the hurry and the bustle, the tar and the rope and the smells of all the Empire."

Kellard Maine looked away over the side to where the great lines of gaunt warehouses herded their bulk down to the water's edge. It was a little extraordinary, he thought, that this perfect creature, with a voice that was like the echoes of golden waterfalls cascading through slumbrous summer woods, could exist and live and have her world of charm and sweetness in the midst of the welter of peril and danger that was threatening the very soul of the nation.

"But," she said, with a reminiscent chuckle, "that was an awfully bright idea of yours—that cinema film idea to keep the police off."

"AND that reminds me," said Maine. "That boat has been bobbing about round us ever since. I believe they suspect something."

"In that case, what do you propose doing?"

"I shall have to give them the slip again, I suppose. You see, it's a little difficult for me. I've just wrecked somebody's perfectly good cellar. I blew the wall down. That's how I got out. I let the cellar flood to the roof and then dived for the hole I had made."

"But where on earth was the cellar?" Coralie was finding new marvels in him every minute.

"Under that big warehouse where you picked me up."

"Under *water?*"

"Yes, about two miles under, I should think, judging by the time it took me to get my face up into the air again. Phew! I should have been a dead 'un by now, Miss Warden, if you hadn't happened along. And, look—there's that pig of a police patrol nosing round again. Would you be good enough to slip in to the first water steps you see and maroon me?"

"There are some stairs just along here on the left—close to an old riverside tavern. Do you know it?"

"I don't think I do."

"A lovely old place. 'The Galleons Three.' Isn't it a glorious old name?"

"Perfect. Calls up memory pictures, doesn't it?"

"Boniface is an old friend of mine, an old sea captain, turned innkeeper. Merrydew is his name—Captain Merrydew. If you just pop in there quietly and give him my name, he will do anything in the world for you. Probably get you a dry suit."

"You've been a wonderful friend, Miss Warden."

"Please don't think about it. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes." Maine was a little diffident over that last request.

"Well, what is it? Please don't be shy. Adventures like this only come one's way once in a lifetime. A singer's life is dreadfully placid, you know."

"I'd like to—to know where—that is, when you are singing again.

"Tonight—at the Albert Hall."

"Would you care if I happened to be one of the thousands in front tonight? I promise you I won't make myself conspicuous."

Coralie laughed, a haunting little trickle of silver merriment.

"Come, by all means," she said. "I think I'd like to meet you again."

The boat bumped lightly against the steps, and Maine stepped out.

"There's the Galleons Three, just up there over your shoulder," she said. "My kindest regards to the captain." She nodded, with a smile that matched the sunshine, and in a couple of seconds the motorboat was cutting away again, turning in a wide curve to head back upstream.

Maine watched her go. His head was in a riotous tumult of flying thoughts. The sight and sound of that very delightful girl had been the first softening influence his nature had known since he, scarce more than a boy, sorted out mumps from diphtheria in the wards of that old Slaughterhouse. He, scarcely knowing it, had responded to it, fully and freely. At the first swift attack he had shattered his own declaration that he was a man without a soul—a mere husk of a man, from which all the finer instincts and desires had been burned.

And what a great sport she had been. He found himself pondering that more and more. His first amazing appearance in the water near her. Shooting up from the depths like a human jack-in-the-box would have been enough to have tried any ordinary woman's nerve. But she had faced the situation like a real man of the world. And the discretion of her! Not a word when he roared out to the police patrol to stand clear and keep away. She never gave him away by so much as a glance.

And afterwards, when conversation might have been the touchiest thing on earth, she had kept her end up with a careful carelessness that might have been born in her through long generations of life in the diplomatic chancelleries. She had taken his story and accepted just so much as he cared to tell, never delving too deeply into details or inquiring into motives. She had been just a splendid little friend in need all through. Maine, soured, savage, bitter Kellard Maine, felt as though he wanted to swim out after her and hug her.

Her dainty figure disappeared behind a string of lumbering barges, and Maine turned and made his way up the steps.

CHAPTER III

THE GREAT STRONGROOM

IT TURNED out that The Galleons Three was an old timbered tavern; a relic of a year that has gone beyond all recall. There were dark oak beams in the comfortable old rooms, and wide chimney spaces with inglenooks running into them. A line of hams hung lusciously in the wood smoke, and there was a talkative old grey parrot slung in a cage in the far corner. The windows were portholes. Brass rails, all polished and shipshape,

ran round the walls like the bulkhead rails of a ship's saloon.

The whole place had the tang of far-off seas about it. One half expected to rub shoulders with sailors of the older marine in there, sailors with perukes and pigtails and shiny black hats, sailors with strippy kerchiefs tight round their heads, with knives dangling from girdles and long coats and top boots.

Maine went in and waited for the captain to appear. He thought he would recognize a man with a name like Merrydew without any need of introduction.

The only other occupants of the bar were a man in a dark blue uniform, leaning against the worn counter, and a dark-skinned foreigner in a stall by the window. He of the dark skin sported a thin gold earrings, and when Maine came in, he hid his face behind a newspaper.

The man in uniform looked at Maine shrewdly as he stood there. Then he came over and said quietly, "You're the fellow who was dragged out of the river just now, aren't you?" He touched Maine's sodden clothing and said, "H'm, I thought so. Well, I'm Sergeant Kyne, of the river police, and I think there's something darn strange about it all, don't you?"

"No," said Maine bluntly.

"Well, I do!" said Kyne, with equal bluntness. "And I want to know what it's all about. Where did you fall from, anyway? Who was the girl who picked you up? Why did she dump you here? Why did you put up that bluff about a film to the patrol boat? Come on, let's have it—and the truth, too."

"And if not?" asked Maine.

"Straight along to the station, my son. That's what!" said Sergeant Kyne, draining his glass.

For two or three seconds an electric silence reigned in the barroom, a silence that was unbroken by even a rustle of paper from the bench in the far corner. Maine looked hard at the river man and read the utlimatum, cool and hard in the level eyes.

Kyne was one of the definite type. There was something vital about him, something that comes to a man only after years of service in the authority of a great state force. Lean and yet solid, in some queer indeterminate way he was the perfect exemplar of his calling; an artist would have chosen him as the perfect model for an exhibition painting of a representative of the river police. There was an atmosphere of authority about him. He had the whole might and majesty of the law behind him, and he knew it—he was the capably efficient river official to the life.

Just beyond the barroom windows, mullioned and beautiful with the mellow of age, old London River flowed—Kyne's own stamping ground. From the first lock gates at Teddington, that old-world village which is down in the earliest charts as Tide-Ending Town, to the far misty reaches of the outer estuary by Sheerness, the river police hold sway. It is old water that flows by those dark wharves and warehouses, old as the stories that had their beginning and end at the landing steps by Whitehall Stairs, back in those dim days when gentleman adventurers, explorers, admirals and ocean pickpockets set out, armed with the Queen's Commission, to open up new worlds in the golden West.

Ever since then the old waterway has gone on adding to its history, collecting stories and amassing romance from the passing years—and piling up its mysteries and secrets with every tide that flows. That stretch of water owns a vast history today, a history that is dark with deeds of crime and violence as it is bright with the glittering tales of high accomplishment.

And Kyne was one of those critical, clear-eyed men from whom that river had little to hide. Most things that transpired on her broad bosom were known to him—the ferreting out of the river's hidden life was his trade, his profession and his livelihood. A casual onlooker might have witnessed that dramatic little scene out in the river and identified it with nothing more than a rather romantic rescue of a man in difficulties by an unusually pretty girl in a motorboat.

But Kyne, with the very pulse of the river beating in his veins, had sized up something that required a deeper explanation than that of a mere river rescue. He had seized upon it with the quietly tenacious grip of his kind, and Maine knew there would be no letting go till he was satisfied.

He fought for time. It was a situation that wanted some thinking out. To Maine there was something ironic, something devilish about this sudden butting in of a new complication. After extricating himself from two tough propositions in as many hours he thought Fate might have let up on him for a little while.

Then the old sardonic smile flickered back in his eyes, the wintry glint that seemed to be gently grinning at destiny and yet was almost void of humour. He had been such a cork on the stormy waters of life that this new squall couldn't make much difference one way or the other.

He tried to put his hands in his pockets, but the water had clogged them.

Kyne noticed his difficulty, and his eyelids half lowered.

"Well?" he said. "What's doing? You don't seem overcommunicative about it."

Maine smiled against himself.

"What's the use?" he said. "I can't tell you any more than you know. You wouldn't believe me if I tried to."

KYNE stood back a pace and took a good look at him. This was a new one on him. He knew there was something highly intriguing behind that little scene, but he was hardly prepared for a man to say that the true story of it was beyond credulity.

"Oh, yes!" he muttered. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Kellard Maine."

"That means nothing in my young life. What's your address?"

"The Grand Embassy, Piccadilly."

"Swell hotel, eh? And what's your line—cards, oil, stocks or the gold brick?"

Maine laughed and, as the proprietor came in, ordered a hot brandy with a squeeze of lemon. "Wrong all the way down the line," he said. "I'm not a con man. Do I look it?"

"My son, you've got 'prison' sticking out all over you. You've done time—a long stretch, too. You're not sure of yourself. You're new to liberty. You've got the convict's voice—your lips scarcely move when you talk. Dammit, for two pins you'd be calling me 'Sir'!"

"Give me a chance," said Maine grimly. "Your pace is a bit too hot for me."

Kyne tossed half a crown on the counter. "That's better," he said bluntly. "You have that drink with me. I like a man who says it with nobs on. Now, Mr. Kellard Maine, you just tot off the answers to this little lot. What line are you working?"

"I'm of entirely independent means. I inherited my father's fortune when I was eighteen. Since then it has been—er—accumulating."

The river man paused with his glass to his lips.

"Dartmoor?" he jerked out.

Maine nodded. "Fifteen years," he said gently.

"Phew!" said the river man. "Murder, was it?"

"That, to be frank, was the issue before the court."

"Still think you're innocent, eh? I know most murderers do."

"Well, I've just been having a chat with the man I murdered."

Kyne was halfway through his glass of beer and he spluttered at Maine's cool sentence.

"G'wan," he said rudely.

Maine allowed the jibe to float past him. It was no use warring with a man who held him practically wrapped around his little finger.

"Any more questions?" he asked.

"Yes, my son. When did you fall into the river?"

"And also?" queried Maine, with a dry smile.

"And also, what did you fall *from?*" appended the river man.

"The answer to the first is 'never'; and to the second the answer is 'nothing'," said Maine.

"Which makes it all that much clearer, don't it?" said Kyne acidly.

"I came up from down below," said Maine.

"I've seen blazin' red devils do that in pantomime," said Kyne warmly. After a little while he muttered, "But *not* in the middle of the Thames in broad daylight. Now tell me another."

"I blew a wall down in order to get out: a cellar wall that was right down below the water level."

"I'll bet you did, too! Took a twelve-inch Navy gun down with you to do it, didn't you?"

"No, I used the cordite from the cartridges in my own gun."

"Very good! Oh, very good indeed! Say, son, you ought to be writing for the movies. There was a girl in it, too."

"I didn't fix it," muttered Maine, without a smile.

"Who was she, anyway?"

"A—a friend of mine."

"Since when?"

"Since just now."

"Quite. And her name is—"

"Not for publication, Mr. Kyne."

"Is she in this little affair with you?"

Maine looked at him, hard.

"Put this down in your notebook," he said stiffly. "She never knew I existed until I butted up under her boat out there. Never knew I'd been born—never knew I was on the earth. And with your permission we will leave her right clean out of it. That's all. Not another word. Hike me off to the lock-up if you like—kick me out and let me go, if it suits you: keep me here for another hour answering your damnfool questions, if it amuses you—*but*, you'll put the shutters up on the little lady in the motorboat."

Kyne looked at him admiringly.

"Well, you're not so slow, either," he said; and he winked at himself in the glass.

"Anything else?" asked Maine.

Kyne nodded. "Why not let's be friends?" he said casually. "I like you—like the way you stand up to it."

His hawk-like eye never moved from Maine. He had suddenly realised that the queer chap

in the sodden clothes was talking nothing but hard truth.

Maine drank his brandy and ignored him. He turned to the proprietor.

"You're Captain Merrydew?" he asked.

"At your service, sir."

"Miss Coralie Warden said I might introduce myself to you through her. I've just had an accident out in the river there, and I want some dry clothes and a taxi to take me back to my hotel. Can you do that for me?"

"With pleasure, sir. Is Miss Warden well?"

"Very. At least, she appeared so."

"She won't be coming in here today—she's singing tonight at the Albert Hall. Most days she comes in and sits in that corner over there with a little glass of mulled ale and a thick crusty lump of bread and cheese. But not when she has a big night on. Charming little lassie, isn't she?"

KYNE went right up close to Maine and took him by the coat sleeve. "C'm here, you!" he said quietly. "You are too good to be true. Was that Miss Warden who rescued you in that motorboat?"

"Yes."

"Miss Coralie Warden, the great singer?"

"According to her publicity agent, the 'Nightingale of Ten Capitals.'"

Kyne scratched his head and steered his man over to a quiet spot near the window. With insidious quietness and easy unconcern the occupant of the corner bench laid down his paper and slid out of the bar.

Maine noted an odd peculiarity about him when he put the paper down. The little finger of his right hand was withered, a stunted little growth barely an inch long.

"Now let's have it clean and straight," said Kyne. "You sound pretty good to me, and I want to know what's behind it. Start right in at the beginning."

Maine looked at him pointedly. "Scotland Yard wouldn't believe me," he said. "I don't think you would either."

"Never mind the Yard," said Kyne. "I'm a Water Rat, and as such, capable of believing the evidence of my own eyes. The biggest opera star in the world fished you out of the ditch and played up to you when you pulled a bluff. Between you, you kidded the patrol boat as easy as eating pie. Added to which, you came out of the water—*but you never fell in.* And I'm kind of interested to know how you managed it. You needn't be backward about spilling the beans. I haven't been floating about on this bit of water all my life without running foul of some devilish queer propositions—and yours can't be any worse than some I've heard. Shoot it, man."

And so, for an hour, Kellard Maine sat and talked to him, going over the whole story, detail by detail, from the time he first became suspicious of the extraordinary symptoms that manifested themselves in the body of the stricken man up in the Birkenhead Infirmary right down to that moment in the bar. He glossed over nothing, he left nothing out, but, thread by thread, he wove out the entire fabric of the plot with such convincing meticulousness and byeproofs that no single item was left unaccounted for.

And, almost without appreciating its true significance, Sergeant Kyne began to evince a more than ordinary interest in the recitation. Maine first noticed it when Kyne began slipping in unexpected questions of his own. From his shrewd experience he picked on the probable weaknesses with the sure touch of the old hand at the game. Had Maine's story been faked, or had it been only twenty-five per cent garbled, Kyne would have exploded it before ten minutes had passed. In half an hour he had begun to believe, in three quarters he was convinced, and by the time Maine was finished he was an ally, a heart and soul convert.

But, blunt and direct to the end, he declared his motives without any fuss or pious emotion whatever.

"Of course," he said tersely, "you're in this for the sake of right and justice, for the sake of the lives of half the inhabitants of Great Britain. I'm not. I'm in it for all I can get out of it. Which same is Promotion, and on this section of the river we spell it with a capital P. Mind you, I don't think the job is half so serious as you make out—your own personal connection with it and the wrongs you've suffered have probably led you to exaggerate it a bit even to yourself, but to me it's pretty obvious that there's something mighty fishy going on for this to have happened at all. And I'm with you. In so far as I can be of any use, you can count on me. There's a station of my own, a three and six a day rise of pay, and maybe half a crown on my pension hanging on this, so you can bank on me delivering the goods."

Maine heard him with mingled feelings of elation and scepticism. He had had so many buffetings from officialdom in his time that it was just a little extraordinary to hear one declare his beliefs so wholeheartedly. Maine had come to believe that Scotland Yard and all government officials consisted of ninety-nine parts open scoffers and one part Doubting Thomases. And it was rather unsettling to hear a man like Kyne acknowledging himself under his banner with so free a will.

"All I'm asking is," said the sergeant in con-

clusion, "let me know when I can begin, and how, and I'm your man."

"There's only one end you can work," said Maine quickly, "and that's the end that begins right here in the river. Somewhere up or down these banks Jaan Vorst has his huge germ incubatory, a gigantic bacilli farm that has no ingress from the road or wharf. Find that building and we've halved our task. Surely the Yard would *have* to act if they were presented with the evidence of enough disease germs to kill twenty million people—and adding to themselves with every hour of every day!

"That's your job, Kyne. Hunt up and down this river till you've run that farm to earth. Haunt it—get other boats up and down stream to keep an eye open for Vorst's motorboat. Then shadow it till you've got him. Every now and then he used to make a journey about ten in the morning from the farm as far as Cleopatra's Needle. What his business was, I don't know, but I've discovered that much from a newspaper seller in the vicinity. He had noticed Vorst's huge figure two or three times a week coming up the steps by the Needle. But I doubt whether he will ever make that trip again—not after this morning! It must have come as a bit of a shock to him to know that there was someone who knew his movements so perfectly as to be lying in wait for him at that particular point. No, I don't think you'll ever find him making that trip again. You'll have to try another route."

Kyne copied out a minute description of Vorst's motorboat from Maine's dictation. He studied it thoroughly. "And I'm not so sure I haven't seen this boat myself, nosing up and down about here somewhere," he said.

"Maybe," assented Maine. "But you won't find it an easy job to nail him. He is an elusive devil. He has ways of eliminating pursuit that are, to say the least of it, unexpected. God, my head's ringing now. I've an idea you will find he has a secret little entrance to his place *under* the piles of a wharf. It would be quite simple. A motorboat can tie up to a wharf without exciting suspicion. It's done every day all over the river. Waiting for his opportunity, he could easily slip out and step across from one to the other of the great supporting timbers or even smuggle the boat itself through."

Kyne nodded. "You leave that end to me—us!" he said. "By this evening I'll have two dozen patrol boats all warned to keep their eyes skinned for a green-painted motorboat with a yellow streak along the rubbing band. And he will have to be the slickest thing in boots to get away with it from my bunch. I'll promise you that within a week I'll take you right along to the identical hole where the rat goes to ground."

Maine stood up. The proprietor was beckoning him over. "Here's my card, Kyne," he said. "Call on me for any funds you may require—and ring me up at that address the moment you have any news for me."

"Your clothes are all ready, sir, up in room four," said the proprietor. "I sent out for them. They're about your fit. The maid will show you upstairs."

Maine followed the girl and climbed up the wide oak staircase to his room.

SERGEANT KYNE glanced at Maine's card and tucked it carefully away in his wallet. He watched the virile figure swing out of the door and, with a brief nod to Captain Merrydew, he himself went out into the street. His headquarters were a good half-mile away, and he was anxious to get there before the late duty shift came on. With a man of Kyne's temperament every urgency required a quick transmission into action; there could be no such thing as resting on the oars or waiting for something to turn up.

A municipal clock clanged out four o'clock when he came in sight of his station, a long low series of buildings built round a tiny little dock about twenty yards square. A few yards from the entrance gate a looseness in his right boot made him look down. His bootlace had come untied.

Without further ado he hoisted his foot against a doorstep and fumbled for the laces.

He was tying the lace half mechanically, his mind wrestling with the extraordinary problems that had just been propounded to him, when a voice came gently to his ear from just behind him.

"Excuse me—me give you message—you no lookee round—plenty people look see!"

The voice came in a cringing whine from over his shoulder, a plaintive Oriental voice that seemed to be compounded of fear and malignance together.

Kyne did not move. He knew his yellow men too well to betray symptoms of any sort where they were concerned. Even the mournful plea for alms may be nothing more than the careful prelude to sticking a knife upward between the ribs.

He remained motionless in the doorway, cool, flexing his muscles in readiness to kick out like a bucking mule.

A hand crept in over his shoulder. It was a fragile-looking hand, long and lean and olive-yellow. The bones stood out in stark bas-relief. Held tightly between fingers and thumb was a neat white envelope. Kyne's eyes riveted themselves with swift intensity on a pe-

cularity in the little finger—it was withered, a mere stunted little stub.

Slowly, and without a slightest sign of diffidence, it slipped the envelope under Kyne's boot and withdrew.

"No touchee yet!" said the voice in a purring whisper that was crawling alive with deviltry. "And no lookee round for one-two minute." There was a soft padding of thick-felted soles retreating down the road.

Kyne finished tying his bootlace, and unconcernedly picked up the envelope. It was made of ordinary stationery paper, and was unaddressed. He slid a strong thumbnail across the top flap and opened it. Inside was a single piece of paper, folded once across the middle. Kyne took it out and spread it open in his hands.

He felt a sharp little prickle of surprise and anticipation tingling the nape of his neck.

"Hell!" he said wrathfully.

The piece of paper was six inches square. Across the middle of it was painted a thick black triangle, and the three sides enclosed the significant warning intimation, *Five p.m.* Sergeant Kyne had been handed the Black Triangle. According to its assessment, he had exactly sixty minutes to live.

He stared with beetling brows at the malignant thing in his hands. There was no mistaking the token. It was the Black Triangle, without a doubt, the baleful warning of impending death that was sent to all Jaan Vorst's victims.

It was an exact replica of the symbols Kellard Maine had described only a few minutes before—the identical counterpart of the death sentence imposed upon Hartigan and Vallis and Kellard Maine himself.

He looked round sharply over his shoulder. The sinister messenger was gone. There was neither sight nor sound of him along the great highway. One or two Orientals there certainly were, sprinkled here and there among the hurrying traffic. But there were always plenty of them to be seen in that down-river thoroughfare; it was a sort of Little Canton in London, swarming with every colour and creed of humanity from soft-footed Turcoman to brown Hindu. He gave a hurried, knife-stab glance at each. Not a single one of them was wearing the national thick felt shoe.

"Umph!" he growled, and turned his attention to the missive. The whole incident had nettled more than frightened him. He was conscious of a sharp irritation at having been caught napping within ten minutes of nailing his colours to the mast.

He scrutinised the paper intently, every sense alive and tingling with a sudden, keyed-up feeling of danger. It hung in the air all around him, droned aloud in the din of the passing traffic.

The Black Triangle itself was hard and shiny, like a stiff veneer superimposed on the surface of the paper. He smoothed it over with his thumb and found it as hard to the touch as dried enamel. The texture of it was very unusual. He held it up to the light and tried to discover its ingredients. But it was mysteriously evasive. It was as flexible as rubber, yet as shiny as wax.

He wet it with his finger and rubbed it vigorously. But whatever the curious compound was, he found it impervious to water. Despite the most vigorous efforts, not a smudge nor a stain came off it; neither was the high, lacquer-like polish injured in any way.

The *Five p.m.* was obviously written in recently with pen and ink. It was done in big block capitals, and some of the ink had percolated in little patches right through the paper.

But the Triangle material was something much more durable. He judged it to be an extremely fine variety of some secret Eastern varnish, with shellac as its basic element.

In view of the later tragic events, it was remarkable that Kyne should have been attracted right at the outset to the subtleties of the Black Triangle. It said reams for the amazing insight of Jaan Vorst, who from that moment laid definite claim to recognition as a psychologist of high quality.

Kyne pushed the thing into his pocket and stared angrily up and down the road. He wanted the enemy to show itself, to put in a personal appearance so that he could go in and give it battle with his two bony fists and bash some of the infernal impudence out of it. There was hot anger burning in his breast, a rage that such effrontery could be offered to his own august person in the broad highways of London itself. But the enemy remained out of sight, although he had the uncomfortable conviction that he was being silently watched from half a dozen different points.

He strode thoughtfully down to his depot and pushed in through the swing doors. At that time of the afternoon the place had a deserted appearance. Only a charge officer appeared on view, perched on a high stool against a desk, conning some official accounts. He tapped speculatively on the door of the chief's inner sanctum and got no response. The second in command had a small office adjoining, and Kyne went over to him. The Second was a sergeant like himself, and the two were friends in something more than a mere Service spirit. John Castle and Kyne had gone through the harassments and difficulties of early training together, and the bond of old days held.

"IS THE chief out?" asked Kyne, glancing over at him.

Castle nodded. "At the Courts all day—got about a dozen cases on the slate, smuggling, mostly; not expecting him back tonight. Anything I can do?"

"Yes, come inside, Jack. I want to talk to you," said Kyne, and headed into the chief's private room.

Castle followed him in, a curious interrogative look in his eyes.

"What's the matter?" he inquired as he closed the door. "You look peevish over something."

Kyne told him. For some little time there was a silence in the room, save for the quiet, droning monody of Kyne's voice recapitulating the story as he had heard it from Maine. Kyne talked quickly and decisively, and the growing look of amazement on Castle's face testified to his powers of linking up details of evidence.

"You haven't been drinking, have you?" he asked briefly.

"It's too tall an order for you?" suggested Kyne, sitting back and lighting his pipe.

"Sounds more like a shilling shocker than a credible tale of the river," assented Castle. "Have you any proofs—I mean, other than the mere say-so of this chap Maine?"

Kyne puffed at his pipe. "Yes," he said shortly. "That's what I came to see you about. The Vorst crowd have singled *me* out for slaughter."

"You?" Castle jumped.

Kyne produced the Black Triangle from his pocket and opened it out on the table.

"Take a look at *that!*" he said. "And then tell me I'm imagining things."

"When—when the devil did you get this?"

"Five minutes ago—as I was coming here from the 'Galleons.' They got a line out on me within ten minutes of my leaving Kellard Maine. Now that's too darn quick to be natural. What do you make of it, Jack?" There was a red glitter flickering about in the deeps behind his eyes, and he looked as though he were mentally visioning a wipe-up of the whole foreign quarter.

Castle looked intently at the fatal sign. He kept his hands in his pockets and eyed it askance.

"Seems a bit complicated to me," he said evasively. "Pity you've spoiled it for finger-print examination. Who do you say this fellow is?"

"Jaan Vorst is the only name Maine knows him by. But he's traveling under an alias, you can bet—and by heck, he travels quick! The swine—I'd have knocked his chin off if I'd had half a chance of getting my hands on him."

"Elusive?"

"Like a shadow. You know those nights downriver—you get 'em most round about November—when the fog hangs thick as yellow cotton-wool and you can't tell whether the creak of an oar is coming from north, south, east or west, and you see little boats flitting in and out of the coiling fog banks like so many little flat ghosts? Well, that's the kind of atmosphere this devil incubates. You set off on a chase after him, you cut and dry a plan, you think you've got him, when—pouf!—another little black shadow sneaks up behind you and you find your hands going up over your head almost before you know you're afloat. That's how he got me this afternoon. Got me on the hop in the first round. Dammit, you can't even wriggle when there's a Chinaman two inches behind you, fondling over your ribs with the busy end of a ten-inch knife."

"Would you know him again?"

"The little finger of his right hand died before he was born. Sure, I'd know him again."

"We'll comb the whole area till we get him. In six days I'll have every Chinaman with a withered finger in London paraded for your special benefit. You can sort out the one you want."

"That won't help me. Vorst is the man I want. And I've never set eyes on him yet. He's too slick for my liking, too slick by a thousand miles. I don't see how he gets it."

Castle nodded slowly. "Someone must have heard you and Maine talking in that bar," he said. "That's the only link I can see. But they certainly got a line out on you without stopping. Seems like a bit of a speed merchant, this Jaan Vorst."

"And then some," agreed Kyne feelingly. "The thing is, what are we going to do about it? I don't feel like sitting down and waiting to be mopped up in cold blood."

Castle looked at him with a newer, more definite interest.

"You don't mean to say you're going to take any notice of this fool sheet of paper, do you?" he jerked out.

Kyne stared at him.

"What would you do?" he inquired, after a silence that was long enough to become just a little bit tense.

"Pack a gun into a hip pocket and walk out to look for the gent concerned," said Castle pithily.

"Yes, like hell you would! That's just what he's expecting me to do. That's just what he's hoping I will do. And that's just where he aims to get the drop on me. Say, Jack, you don't think this Black Triangle is merely a bit of elaborate play-acting, do you?"

"I should say it's simply a warning from one

of the Tongs to keep out of a bit of business that might become a little too hefty for you. That's all. You'll find it's nothing but a rather well organised bunch of opium smugglers, with a couple of dozen fan-tan joints for a sideline. Pooh! The river's full of them these days. I could point 'em out to you by the gross. Laundry steam in the front; gambling wheels at the back. You're getting scared of a bit of Chinese embroidery."

Kyne gave him a glare that seemed to hold him pinned on the end of it. He was breathing deeply; the edges of his nostrils quivered like a dog's when it scents an enemy out for a fight.

"Well, now let me tell you one," he said quietly. "Sir Wilbert Hartigan was presented with a bit of paper like this. Twelve hours later he was dead; poisoned with a toxin the doctors couldn't analyze. Judge Vallis got one, too. He died a trifle quicker; he ceased breathing just eight hours after he got his. But in both instances the deaths coincided—to the minute—with the time given in the Black Triangle. You think I'm scared; think they've got my nerves on the jump. I'll tell you I'm as steady now as I've ever been in my life. At five o'clock this evening an attempt will be made to murder me! Make no mistake about that. When Jaan Vorst sends his warning—he strikes!"

"Gosh! You've got it bad."

"Have I? Neither Vallis nor Hartigan knew what the Black Triangle meant to them. But I do! I've got their lesson stuck up in front of me. Hartigan probably thought it was a new style of ad for a movie thriller. He met his death with his arms open, wondering what was happening to him—and why. Vallis, too. Neither of them knew what they were up against when they ran foul of the Black Triangle. I'm different. I know what's coming. I'm all tangled up in it—part of the game itself. And death isn't nice—the way Jaan Vorst serves it out."

Castle scratched his head. "Well, I'm blest if I've ever seen you as windy as this before over a job," he muttered.

"Maybe not: but that's because you've never come into contact with anything quite so big as this before. The whole conception of it is a bit too gigantic. It's beyond you. Vorst served a death notice on Maine himself this morning. That was to take effect at midday today."

"And Maine is still alive," said Castle, smiling drily.

"Yes! But before Vorst called his dogs off he let Maine know it. He deliberately took the Black Triangle out of Maine's hand, tore it up into tiny little bits, and let 'em flutter out over the river. That's how Vorst works. Definitely. He lets you know. So far as Maine knows that was the only case in which the death threat was not carried out—and Vorst practically told him ahead that the cancel stamp had gone down."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"That's what. You never know where you are with poisons. You can't see 'em; you don't know they're in the air. The only way you can recognize 'em is when they begin tying knots in your stomach."

"Going out?" asked Castle gently.

"No, I'm not!" declared Kyne. "I'm not scared of the skunks, but I'm not exactly running my head into a trap for fools. That's why I'm in here at all. They know I'm dangerous, know I've got the river-end off to my finger tips; and with half the patrols on the river taking their orders from me, they know that I'm almost as grave a menace as Maine himself. My place is in here, right in here among my own crowd, where, if they *do* get me, it will be a ruddy miracle."

He reached out for the telephone and gave Maine's number.

IN A little while Kellard Maine's voice came on at the other end.

"That you, Mr. Maine?" asked the river man. "Sergeant Kyne speaking. I just thought I'd give you a call—you told me to, if you remember, in the event of any fresh news turning up."

"Well—what?"

"I've got mine! With a five o'clock time limit to live!"

"*What?* What do you mean? Where are you?"

"They've handed me the Black Triangle, that's what I mean. Ten minutes after I left you. A Chinese put it all over me."

"But—but where are you? God, man, you've got to make for cover!" Maine's voice was vibrant with earnestness.

"I'm right here in the chief's inner room in the station."

"Then for the love of heaven don't move from there until after five o'clock. Get your friends around you—as many as you can. Don't let a soul come near you or enter that room—keep them out at the point of the gun, if necessary. I'll get Dr. Hollis on a hurry call and we will be around there as fast as a motor can bring us. I'm ringing off—there's no time to talk this out. Who else is with you?"

"Sergeant Castle—no one else."

"Can you trust him?"

"Certainly."

"Well, don't let anyone else come within a mile of you. Pull your gun and hold it ready. I'll be round at the rush."

Kyne put the phone down. There was just a suspicion of grey-white around his lips, but his hands were as steady as the table itself.

"Anything to put forward?" asked Castle, eyeing him squarely.

"Yes," said Kyne grimly. He glanced at his watch. "According to this paper I have just fourteen minutes of life left in me. Hollis and Maine can't possibly be around here under half an hour. That means the job will be over by the time they get here." He looked critically around the room. "Have you got the keys of that safe?" he asked, and indicated the opposite wall, one-half of which was ocupied by the steel door of what was really a great strong room.

Castle jingled them in his pocket.

"Ought to be fairly invulnerable in there," he said musingly.

"How long could a man live in there without having fresh air let in on him?" asked Kyne.

"Some hours, I should think. It's ten feet square inside. That ought to last you halfway round the clock."

"Fourteen minutes will do for me, thanks," said Kyne, and looked at his watch again. "Thirteen minutes to go."

"Going in?" queried Castle.

Kyne nodded. "Yes; there's a time lock on it, isn't there? Set it so that it can't be opened till Maine gets here. Say twenty past five."

He went over to a rack and lifted down a huge Service Webley, a gun that looked as though it could have drilled a hole through two-inch steel.

Castle was busy with the softly clicking locks. The sound of the oiled wards falling over came tapping softly from the heart of the great door. Then he pulled heavily at two great brass levers and the door swung open.

Kyne examined his gun and loaded it in all six chambers from an ammunition belt on the wall. He tried over the trigger action, saw that it worked to his critical satisfaction, and stuck it handy in his belt.

He peeped into the room.

"Well, a murderer would have to make himself invisible if he wanted to get me in there," he said softly

The room inside was square and almost bare. There was no woodwork; it was all steel, even to the ribbed shelves that ran round the sides of it. There was not even a hiding place for a rat. The emptiness of the place gave it a look of barrenness that was almost gaunt. Here and there were dossiers of papers, some portfolios of official documents and a few deed boxes. But they were all pushed well back against the asbestos wall. There was not a single nook or cranny where a death-dealing device could have been hidden, no matter how small or ingeniously contrived it may have been. The whole of the room was visible to the eye, all at once. For Vorst to have got at him in that great safe appeared to be an utter impossibility. The walls were four inches thick, made of Harveyised armour steel and lined inside with six-inch paddings of pressed asbestos.

Kyne went in and sat on the edge of a shelf, with his gun propped up on his knees and his watch hanging on a shelf-strut opposite him.

"All right, old son?" asked Castle from the doorway

"Yes, Jack," said Kyne, and nodded to him.

Castle slammed the great door, and Kyne heard the soft click of the locks connecting.

For a minute or two Kyne sat without moving. The closing of the great door seemed to have shut him up in a great soundless box from which all contact with the outside world was obliterated He was penned in there, a tiny little human island, insulated from the sea of dread and danger that surrounded him. The silence was absolute. It was uncanny. Not a sound penetrated the steel and asbestos from outside. All there was to do was sit there and count the moments ticking by—and wait for the sound of Jack Castle's key in the lock

For one unworthy moment he felt himself as he really was, a prisoner at the mercy of Jack Castle. The thought burned through his brain that only one man in the world knew he was in that strongroom. Castle had only to tell Maine and Hollis when they arrived that Kyne had already gone out, for yet another crime to be added to the list of London's unsolved mysteries. He dismissed the thought. Castle was his pard. There was not even the shadow of a thought of a liaison between him and the Death Maker.

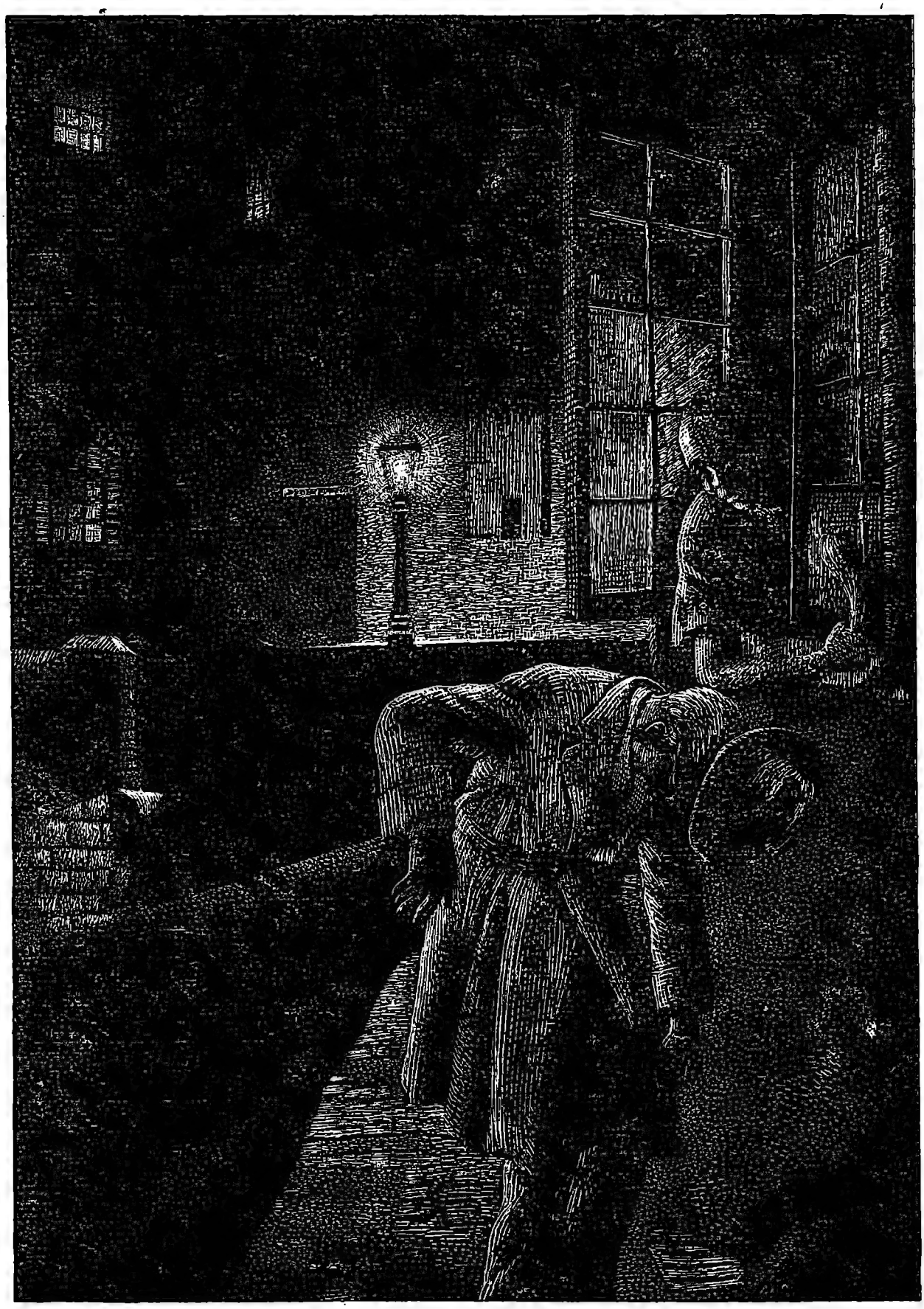
No: whatever danger there was would come from inside that prison cell. He lifted his watch off the shelf-strut and waited, watching the small hand stutter round the tiny dial.

CHAPTER IV

POISON WEAPON

OUTSIDE, with his gun drawn, Castle waited, pacing nervously up and down the chief's room. The keyed-up pressure of the thing had begun to get on his nerves. The garishness of the atmosphere stuck in his gullet and hurt.

His watch pointed to eleven minutes to



It came without hint or warning, a sudden violent collision in his brain.

five, with the second hand crawling round with hellish deliberation.

The minutes dragged slowly by. No sound came from inside the great safe. Once he went over and knocked hard at the door with the butt of his gun, but Kyne did not answer, or, if he did, the sound did not get through the massive, soundproof walls. Once a constable knocked at the door and inquired a routine question of his chief. He went away with a look of amazement on his face at the waspish viciousness of Castle's voice telling him to go to the devil.

Castle wanted to open that door again, to look in and see if his friend was still all right. But the time lock was on, and no power on earth, short of dynamite, could have opened that door until the clock hands released the master lock at twenty minutes past five.

Minute by minute the time passed. Five o'clock struck, with still no sign from the man cooped up inside. Castle began to get irritable and jumpy at the long delay.

At two minutes past five he was biting his nails. At least Kyne might have hammered the door to let him know he was still alive. Come to think of it, there might be more than seemed possible in this job, after all. The Chinese were devilish tricky in the way they got at their intended victims. Kyne, in spite of all precautions, might already be dead. That great safe might already be a silent tomb, a grim mausoleum over the body of the man who had fought out his own destiny in the black silence of its embrace.

He hammered at the door again and there was no response, not a sound nor even the hint of a reply.

By five minutes past five he was cursing the slow-crawling hands of time. He lit his seventh cigarette since Kyne went in. The other six were on the floor, trodden on a dozen times, with less than a quarter of an inch of them burned.

Hollis and Maine arrived at a quarter past. Castle was thankful for the mercy of the break.

Maine was looking deadly serious. His eyes alone asked the question of Castle. They were alive and burning with mute inquiry. Castle pointed to the door of the safe; and Maine nodded and took a deep breath of relief.

In a few hurried sentences Castle explained the situation, Hollis listening intently over his shoulder.

The three of them, in a fever of suspense, waited outside the door, Castle with the keys of the safe in his hand.

Castle's nerves were nearly flying out of his skin. They were like a million little needles all over him, prickling and tingling with the maddening sharpness of apprehension. Of the three of them, Castle had had the worst time of all. Kyne was his lifelong friend; they had worked in double harness together for years and he was beginning to feel something of the mute dread that deadens the souls of those who wait at the smoking pit-head for news of the men below. For thirty long, crawling minutes he had paced an endless sentry-go up and down that room—with a great door standing locked and immovable between himself and his friend. Beyond that door an unnamable horror, rendered doubly awful by the cloak of mystery that surrounded it, had fought out its grim battle for the life of Sergeant Kyne.

For the life of him, he couldn't see how it was possible for the hidden power of the Black Triangle to have penetrated those giant walls. Locked away in a mammoth safe, with not a soul near him, with every possible chance of attack removed and eliminated, and with an armed guard outside ready to shoot at a moment's notice, it seemed utterly impossible for harm to have come to Kyne. And yet . . . the river man knew that the power and influence of the Black Triangle were quantities that could not be reckoned or measured on ordinary standards. Jaan Vorst commanded powers that somehow seemed to verge on the supernatural. In spite of all the evidence of common sense and logic, Sergeant Castle felt the gnawing devils of fear awaking in his heart.

Twice he had knocked. Twice there had come no answer, not even the faintest acknowledgment of a reassuring knuckle tap on the partition. A living wall of silence seemed to have welled out of the safe and clamped down around him from the moment he first went in through the door, a silence in which Kyne himself had merged and vanished.

Dr. Hollis, perturbed and on the tiptoe of nervousness, looked as though he wished he had never become involved in so wholly unpleasant a business. He was fingering his tie and muttering thankful things under his breath for the godsend of the strongroom. It had held out the offer of sanctuary to the man over whose head the threat of doom hung heavy as a cyclone cloud.

The one who showed his feelings least was Kellard Maine himself. That was the oddness that was Maine's chief characteristic, for he was the only one who really knew something of the reality of the power wielded by the Black Triangle. In his inmost heart he feared that they had come too late. He had not the faintest hope of seeing Kyne alive again. Despite the seeming impossibility of getting

into that safe, he knew that the Black Triangle had penetrated even the impregnable steel and asbestos walls of the strongroom. Kyne, for all the safety human ingenuity could devise, might just as well have gone out and sat down in the middle of Trafalgar Square and waited for the end there.

MAINE had no watch, his own had gone west when he wrested the food specimens from the underriver cellar; but ever now and then his iron-grey eyes took a quick glance up at the office clock. He was doing the same as the rest of them, counting the seconds. And that was all the evidence of tension he needed to show. As the last minute began to syncopate round the dial he ceased his pacing up and down and stood, close against the door with his head thrust out, listening.

Then, sharp as a steel slug hitting the safe wall, the time-lock clicked. Castle, with paper-white face and fingers that shook, turned the keys hurriedly and heaved at the brass handle. The great door swung back on its four silent hinges. It seemed to slide open like some huge, silent panel. They stood aside till it came to a ponderous halt, against the flat of the wall behind. The three men, craning their heads over each others' shoulders, stared into the dimness beyond.

"Kyne! Are you there?" Jack Castle whispered the words fearfully, as though half afraid to speak aloud lest the mere stirring to life of sound-waves be responsible for murdering his friend. There was no answer from the dark interior. Kyne, in order to cut himself off from all communication with the outside world, had even switched off the lights.

"Kyne! Are you alive? For God's sake answer, man!" Maine jerked the sentences out in a breathless rush while the doctor's shaking fingers went fumbling up the inside wall for the electric light switch.

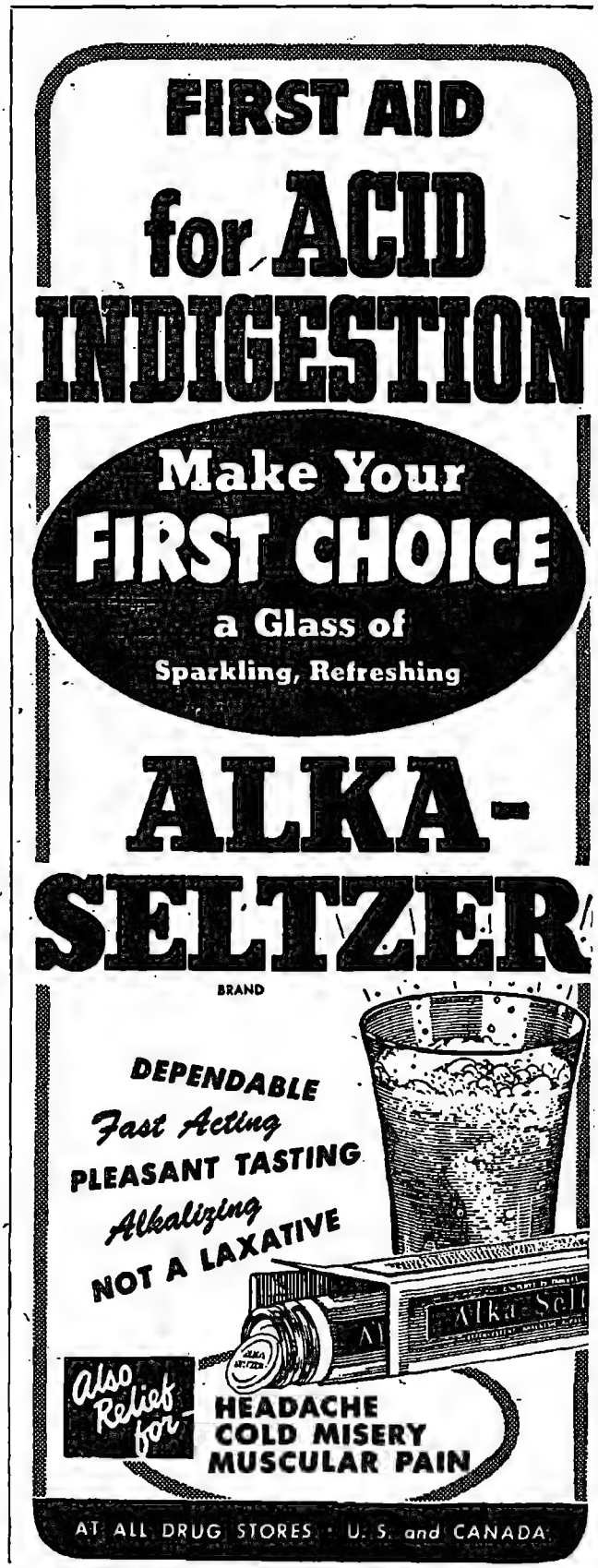
Castle and Maine pushed in together, almost jamming themselves in the doorway.

"Stand back! Don't go in yet! Wait till I get the lights on! Where the damnation is that stupid switch!" It was the doctor's warning voice, high-strung and tense with querulous fears.

But Maine was already inside the room, feeling round on the floor in the darkness. They could hear a faint scuffling of his shoes over the boards, hear the faint hiss of his breath as he turned to locate the man inside.

Then Hollis's groping fingers found the switch; there was a sharp "click" and a glare of yellow radiance flooded out, drenching the room in a sea of brilliant light.

Three heads jerked in a single convulsive movement towards the floor in the far corner. Sergeant Kyne was lying there, his body a twisted ball of constricted muscles, and his face a livid mottle of putty and yellow. He



was lying in a drawn-up heap, his unwinking eyes upturned in a sightless stare at the ceiling.

Hollis hurried over and went on his knees beside him. He took the limp wrist and felt for the artery, his sensitive fingers pressing gently but with feverish intensity on the cold skin. For long seconds he waited, hoping against hope, while the other two stood staring down, pale-faced and with fear crawling alive in their hearts.

"Well, Doctor?" The words seemed to fall like a bomb-burst in the deadly silence.

Hollis did not reply. The hand was pulseless; there was not so much as a flicker of blood coursing through it. He bent lower and, with delicate care, raised one of the eyelids back. He touched the naked eyeball with the tip of his finger. Not a muscle of the eye twitched. The most sensitive of all the organs of the human body failed to react to the acute irritation of touch; the eye itself remained inanimate, unresponsive. For all the effect the doctor's finger had, it might have been a glass eye.

Maine was watching Hollis critically, every faculty focussed on him with breathless concentration. He knew the tests and understood the significance of the sequence in which Hollis had taken them. Pulse dead. Nerves dead. There was only respiration left as a hostage to hope. But in the solemnity of the doctor's actions he saw that hope itself was hopeless. Vorst had, by some miraculous means, succeeded in penetrating the sealed defenses of the strongroom.

HOLLIS already had the little pocket mirror against the parted lips. He held it within half an inch of the twisted mouth, his eyes fixed in a motionless stare at the polished surface of the glass.

But the respiration, too, was dead. There was not even the faintest misting of the glass. Not even the tiniest suspicion of breath clouded the polished reflector.

Hollis stood up and his hands were trembling.

"Search all round these walls, Sergeant," he said shakily. "Something has happened, something utterly inexplicable. This is too horrible for words."

"Dead? Is he dead?" asked Castle, in an awed whisper.

"Sergeant Kyne has been dead some minutes," said Hollis.

"Poisoned?" gasped the river man.

"I'm afraid that is the only inference," replied Hollis gravely.

"You—you mean to say you think this—this Black Triangle threat actually succeeded in killing him, actually got at him, here in these four walls—murdered him in cold blood?"

"I would hesitate to ascribe the miraculous even to Jaan Vorst," returned Hollis slowly. "The fact remains that Kyne has been poisoned—and under circumstances which, to say the least, are remarkable."

"But the time limit—what time did he die!" demanded Castle agitatedly.

"A thing I would not like to dogmatise upon, especially in so unusual a case as this. My ability to compute the exact time of death is presumed to be that of an expert. Personally, I'm not at all sure that my qualifications run to that. But it is my own private opinion that Sergeant Kyne died within a minute of the time stated on the Black Triangle.

"Whether Vorst actually murdered him or not is outside my province altogether. There is no evidence, other than that supplied to you personally by Kyne himself. A jury might, or might not, agree with it. Personally, I think the whole thing sounds too nightmarish for even a jury to be able to accept. Some far more vital proof, some far more direct evidence would be required."

"Yes—yes—but—but how?" Castle stared in mute helplessness at the doctor. The horror, the inexplicable mystery of it, had got him by the throat, and his faculties were groping about in a tangle of loose ends.

"I suggest that some evidence, at least, may be found in this room. Something must have happened here, either in the room itself or immediately outside it; and the traces ought to be visible. A thorough search of every inch of the place appears to be the obvious resource."

Jack Castle's face was a study. Bewilderment, awe, fright and downright bull-necked anger, all strove at once for mastery on his solid features.

"But—Doctor—what—you say he was *poisoned?*" he stammered. "How in the name of merciful heavens could anyone get at him in here! What poison is it? What kind of stuff is it?"

Hollis pursed his lips, and shook his head once or twice. "Difficult to say," he muttered.

"Well, I've seen some devilish queer-looking poison jobs in my time—but never a one like *that!*" declared the river man. "Look—it isn't an acid, the mouth is unburnt; it isn't morphia or one of the drugs; narcotics don't twist a man up into a ball like that. And it isn't laudanum or any of the dopes the tired-of-lifers use."

Hollis did not reply. He was down on his knees again beside the dead man, making a

deliberate examination of the symptoms. Castle looked around at Maine for corroboration, but Maine was already on his way searching round the walls for the explanation of the mystery. Maine held his eyes for a moment and then shrugged.

"Better hurry and get this matter done with before we report it," he said bitterly. "Scotland Yard will have to be informed, and if a bunch of detectives land in here asking miles of questions and putting seals on this room, we shall be in the devil of a mess. Our only chance is to do it now. I want evidence that will string Jaan Vorst up—not merely prove that poor Kyne was murdered. I want to see Vorst in the dock, with the judge's hand reaching out for the black cap."

"Mr. Maine, I'm with you in anything you do," said Castle.

"Then get your eyes to bear on this room. You're more used to hunting for clues than either of us. The one fact that sticks out a mile is that Kyne was undoubtedly attacked. He was all right when he got to the station, and he was still all right when he entered this safe. So that whatever ghastly thing it was that happened to him must have happened in here, between the times of locking and unlocking that door. Nobody could possibly have forced an entrance from this side—*you* were outside with a gun in your hand, and there was a time-lock on the door. That leaves us the other three walls, the roof and the floor. The sooner we get to work and find out how it was done, the better. We don't want Vorst repeating this ghastly trick on some other poor devil."

Maine was going over the walls with a small but powerful magnifying glass. He went over the ground inch by inch. Every scratch, every tiny mark, every little dent and chipping was rigidly scrutinised. Between them, they quartered the walls and ceiling, getting up on the racks to inspect the area overhead. And the further they progressed the deeper the mystery became. There was not a mark of any sort, not even the tiniest scratch, that could have caused a single suspicion. The racks were all movable. There were no joints into the floor or the walls through which contact outside might have been assisted. The floor was covered with thick asbestos sheets. Every slab was still intact. There was not a crack anywhere large enough for even an earwig to have crawled through.

"Phew!" muttered Maine, and he went all over the ground a second time, hurrying nothing; missing nothing; putting every possible thing to every possible test.

And when it was all over he had to admit himself beaten. There was not a clue, not an explanation of any sort. The whole mystery seemed to fuse into a greater mystery than ever. He drew a blank on every hope; everything petered out against proofs that rmained adamant. One thing remained solid and definite after all the rest was sifted out and eliminated. No one had got into that safe except through the door. The walls were inviolate. There was not a single cranny in them anywhere.

CASTLE'S results were equally barren. He mopped his forehead and looked around with a slowly increasing bewilderment. "Not so much as a pinprick," he said. The quiet amazement in his voice showed that Castle for some minutes had been floundering hopelessly out of his depth. "Haven't you any sort of an idea at all, Mr. Maine?" he asked, trying to pluck the beginnings of an explanation out of nowhere.

"I had," said Maine savagely, "before we sounded this room. I've been looking for a drill-hole, an incision large enough to take a steel pipe, through which poison could be pumped into the safe. A gas, a vapour of some sort."

Hollis rose from his long inspection.

"Kyne did not die from a poison introduced by inhalation," he said decisively. "The toxin is in his system, in his blood. It was introduced subcutaneously, through the skin. It is the most virulently working germ I have ever known."

"Do you recognize it, Doctor?" inquired Maine. A glimmering of a new idea was beginning to form in the back of his brain.

"Yes—and no. It is a remarkable culture; an extraordinary fusion of two distinct cultures, if I may put it that way. It appears to me to be an entirely new species of tetanus bacillus; the lockjaw germ. But the astonishing thing about it is that its effects are not confined to the normal distressing distortion of the jaw—they seem to have affected the whole body in the same awful way. Every single muscle is drawn up out of place; he has been half strangled by the reflex contraction of the tongue.

"I would hazard a shrewd guess that all the internal organs are equally painfully displaced. Death may have been fairly speedy, but it must also have been shockingly agonising. If you can imagine all the exquisite agony of lockjaw setting in on the kidneys, the lungs, the liver, the eyes—you have some idea of the way in which Kyne died. My personal opinion is that he died the moment the heart was attacked, which, in all probability, occurred very quickly, once the toxin had gained its hold."

"Awful!" said Castle. Very reverently he bent down and raised the body of his friend. Hollis pushed the door wide open and he carried it out and laid it gently on the table in the chief's private room. He took a great dusting sheet from a cupboard and covered the body.

Maine searched under the place where Kyne had lain; but there was nothing there to excite the least suspicion. Hollis, once the climax was passed, had got back to his old professional dignity of mien.

"A dreadful business, is it not?" he said quietly. "That seizure must have taken him almost instantaneously. The poor fellow would scarcely have had time to know what was happening. You see how it was? He went down in a heap just where he stood."

"He wouldn't even have been able to answer Castle's knocks?" queried Maine.

"I doubt if he was ever able to move a single muscle voluntarily. His arms would have locked, too. He was just one tremendous 'cramp,' with all the agony of it simply numbing him into helplessness."

Maine, with a glint of the old bitter light flickering to life behind his eyes, went out to Castle.

"Sergeant," he said quietly, "you were with Kyne from the moment he came into the station here, were you not?"

"I was here when he arrived. I was in the outer office, and he came right through to me and said he wanted to see me privately."

"And you came on in here, didn't you?"

"Yes, I followed him in."

"Now, during that time, nobody could possibly have got at him in any way, or have got near enough to have injected him with that poison—say, pricked him with a needle?"

"Not one chance in a million, sir. We were alone all the time."

"How did he seem to you?"

"Quite all right, sir. I didn't notice anything unusual."

"Did he complain of pain—or anything like that?"

"No, sir. We talked about the Black Triangle business from first to last. He certainly never complained about himself."

"Did he look ill?"

"N-no, sir. A bit white, though—and sort of serious. It's my belief he *knew* he would never come out of that safe alive again."

Maine turned to Hollis.

"Doctor," he said, "Sergeant Kyne was as good as a dead man before he ever went into the safe. He was got at even before he entered this station. No power on earth could have saved him. He was a doomed man from the moment he got that black Triangle."

"You mean—the Chinaman?" asked Hollis.

"No, I mean the Black Triangle itself. Vorst has surpassed himself this time in absolute hellish ingenuity. By some means or other he poisoned Kyne through the actual piece of paper on which the Triangle was painted. Where is it—have you got it here?"

Castle fished it gingerly out of a drawer.

"That's it," he said. "He brought it in with him."

Maine took it and examined it closely.

"I thought so," he said. "It's different from the ones forced on me—different from the ones given to Vallis and Hartigan. Tell me, Castle, did he finger this paper much?"

"More than I should have felt like doing. I felt scared of it from the moment he pulled it out of his pocket."

"Did you touch it?"

"Not me. The thing gave me the creeps. I wouldn't have touched it with a barge-pole."

"You probably owe your life to a cautious nature," grunted Maine. "Kyne was an inquisitive sort of a chap, wasn't he?"

"Yes; he liked messing about with things until he found out all about them."

MAINE went over and examined the dead man's thumbs. The balls of them were turning black and the skin was slightly roughened, as though he had given them an accidental rub on a piece of superfine sandpaper.

"You see what happened?" Maine pointed to the discoloured thumb-tips.

The doctor was staring hard at the limp fingers.

"Bless my soul!" he muttered. "What an extraordinary thing! Maine—those thumbs were quite normal a moment or so ago. That discoloration has set in since I examined them."

"That is as I thought. The thumbs are the seat of infection. That is how the Black Triangle killed. Kyne examined that lacquer-like surface a trifle too carefully. He smoothed it over with his thumbs. The varnish contained an element of something extremely sharp and hard. Probably diamond dust. It scored the skin just sufficiently for the germs to enter and get a hold. I've heard of a similar case. But the poison used was one fairly well known to toxicologists; a decomposition. Its effects were equally dreadful. I wouldn't be surprised, Doctor, if you don't find that some such variety has been used in conjunction with tetanus bacilli in this instance. You will be able to find out, anyhow—for the chances are that you will be called in by the Crown to make the necessary analysis. Castle, you'd better phone Scotland Yard. Hollis and I will wait here. The Yard will have to

sit up and take notice now, I should say!"

There followed for the three men a long and deadly period of waiting. Castle got through to the Yard and communicated the baldest outline of the case to the authorities there. He was told, in the cold, unexcited way of the department, that an officer would be sent to take formal depositions from the witnesses and to make such other investigations as seemed necessary to him. Scotland Yard was not going to be stampeded out of its dignity by so secondary an arm of the force as the river police.

The Water Rats, said the yard, were all very well so long as they confined their attentions to smugglers and pier-head jumpers and similar small fry among the breakers of the law, but they were apt to lose their sense of perspective when something slightly larger cropped up.

For three hours they sat and waited, talking sporadically in disjointed phrases. The shock and the brutality of the thing that had just happened seemed to have cast a cloud of silence over them. None of them wanted to talk; yet each one felt the uncomfortable distaste of the little silences that fell.

They were glad of the interlude offered by the arrival of the station superintendent. Castle did all the talking so far as he was concerned, merely turning to the others for a corroborative nod or a shrug now and then. He, slightly incredulous, kept his own counsels, preferring to wait for the man from the Yard. Beyond the fact that he had been robbed of a first-class officer, it was a matter that had already passed beyond his jurisdiction—and the Yard man would be more competent to handle it than he, anyway.

The Yard man came, a broad-shouldered, thick-chested, tight-lipped man in a bowler hat and a raglan that smelled of stale tobacco.

"Bit of a queer case, isn't it?" he muttered, coming to the point with a run.

He pulled out a thick notebook and flicked it open.

"I've only the skeleton of this job yet," he said, "but from the odd bits I've heard it sounds more like the imagination of a man in delirium tremens than a murder case." He looked round critically. "Which one of you is Maine?" he asked.

"I'm Kellard Maine."

"Oh, you are, are you? You're the fellow who's just come out of Dartmoor?"

"Yes."

"They told me you were mixed up in it. You were in for murder, I believe?"

Maine nodded.

"H'm! The idea about you at the Yard is that you're a crank. You know that?"

"Oh, yes," said Maine, and yawned. "They're right, too, I should think. Only a crank would think it worth while to correct the errors of a public body."

"Cranky about being sentenced unjustly. That the grievance?"

"If you put it that way—that's the grievance, officer. The man I'm alleged to have murdered happens to be the man who has just murdered Sergeant Kyne. A few inquiries on your part will verify that. I suggest you take a full and complete statement from Castle before you question me further. I think you will realize that you are handling something rather important."

The Yard man did. After twenty minutes of question and intricate cross question, he suddenly pursed up his lips and looked keenly at the superintendent.

"Too big for me!" he jerked out. "Something in it! By gosh—more like a live bomb."

"One liable to go off at any moment," agreed Maine gently.

The detective snapped his notebook shut.

"The chief will have to come in on this," he annnounced. "There's something hellish big going on somewhere, and the chief himself will have to handle it."

"Sir Everard Lewis?" inquired Dr. Hollis.

"Maybe, sir. But certainly one of the Big Four. Detective Inspector Brinsley, I expect. He's the best of the bunch and it's in his division. He will want to see you on it. You may have to hold the post-mortem, sir. But I believe you know Detective Brinsley fairly well, don't you, sir?"

"Very well indeed!"

"You'll be able to tell him more about it in half an hour than I could in a whole day. Leave that strongroom just as it is. Don't let anyone touch anything in it or go near it. This is a job he will have to get all his teeth into. Sorry I was a bit skeptical when I first came in, Mr. Maine—but it *is* a bit of a shocker, isn't it?"

"I quite admit it," said Maine. "I told the Yard so—several days ago."

"You did!" said the detective, with a dry smile. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be getting back. The sooner we get busy on this job the better. I'll make a full report to Sir Everard as soon as I can get hold of him."

IT WAS ten o'clock before Maine got clear of the River Station. Detective Brinsley had come on the scene hotfoot in the fastest car the Yard commanded. Ten minutes with Dr. Hollis convinced him of the gravity of the situation. He went over the details with a thoroughness that evidenced the seriousness of his own personal opinions. He hammered away

till he had mastered the entire ramifications of what he openly admitted was the most amazing case he had ever been called upon to handle.

"Maine," he said awkwardly, "I scarcely know what to say to you. Were I in your place I should feel like going berserk and shooting half the judges in London."

Maine waved a sombre hand. "Far better set about laying Jaan Vorst by the heels," he said. "I'm not complaining. At least, not to the extent of eliminating the Bench."

Brinsley regarded him with a quiet scrutiny.

"But you realize that all this must be kept as quiet as possible, don't you?" he asked.

"Quite. I've realized that for considerably longer than you, Inspector. That knowledge has tied my hands. I've been aware of this ghastly plot for days. Scotland Yard ridiculed me. You did yourself. You put me down for an old woman with a bee in my bonnet. The last time I approached the authorities I was actually kicked out. Scotland Yard did that to me—but, by hokey, Fleet Street wouldn't have done that!

"The press would have opened their doors and their arms to me. I could have had reporters and special correspondents camping on my doorstep. The columns of all the newspapers in town would have been open to me. England would have been reading the greatest splash story since the Armistice.

"And I couldn't do it. With all the facts and the welter of evidence in my possession I was as helpless as though I were handcuffed to a palm tree in the middle of the Sahara. I just had to stand by and look on—and wait for something like this to turn up and jolt Authority into a realisation of what was going on under its nose." His voice trailed off bitterly. "Oh, yes, I know we've got to lie low and say nothing."

Brinsley turned to the superintendent.

"Not a word of this to a living soul," he said. "You understand?"

" I do, sir."

"I wouldn't be surprised if the chief doesn't take the whole case out of my hands and conduct it himself. It's colossal! If this story leaks out there will be living hell to pay. Britain will be in a panic in twenty-four hours. Food prices will soar to famine heights. Half the markets in the kingdom will be on the scrap heap. The whole thing must be hushed up—kept behind steel doors as impassable as that strongroom there."

"But—but what about Sergeant Kyne, sir?"

"There will be no inquest! This is a case where the safety of the majority becomes the paramount consideration. Constitutional regulations and routines will have to go overboard till the menace is squashed. I will arrange about this. Hollis, I'll have to get you to exert your influence in this matter. You'll have to put your name to a lie—but the whitest lie that ever went down on paper. You've examined the body, haven't you?"

"Very minutely, Inspector."

"What were your conclusions?"

The doctor cleared his throat. "To me it is very obvious that the unfortunate officer passed away during a heart attack," he said. "It is more than possible that he did not even know he was suffering from cardiac trouble. It is quite symptomatic of the disease; the worst heart cases are quite unaware of their disability."

"A very normal and natural way to die, sir?"

"Oh, perfectly."

"There was nothing to excite your suspicions—nothing whatever to make you hesitate in signing a certificate of death from natural causes?"

"Nothing whatever."

"And in that case—"

"An inquest will be entirely unnecessary. But. . . ."

"Well?"

"In the interest of justice I would like to make a careful analysis of the man's blood."

"Was Kyne married?" asked the detective.

"No, sir," said Castle.

"Then I'll see what arrangements the chief can make about it for you. He may be able to get the body removed to your laboratory tonight," said Brinsley. "You, Maine—you will hold yourself in readiness to act in every accord with the men we shall put in on this case?"

"Of course."

He turned to them all. "And this is an order to all of you," he said incisively. "If pressmen come around making inquiries of any one of you—refer them to me, direct to the Yard. If those busybodies get their noses in, all the fiends of hell won't keep them out. Send them along to me. I'll keep them quiet, if I have to send the whole lot out to sea in a boat—and sink it!"

He wrote out a few hurried orders to Castle and then left for headquarters, speeding away in his car as fast as the car could take him.

Kellard Maine went out into the cool night air and mopped his forehead. Beneath his calm exterior his pulses were racing.

The Yard was in! It was standing four square with him. No longer were its personnel slightly amused scoffers, but allies, partisans in the game in deadly earnest. He felt the burden of responsibility already easing its crushing weight from his shoulders. There was a feeling of relief in the very coolness of the air.

HE CALLED a taxi, wanting only to get back to the Grand Embassy and lose himself in the long luxury of sleep.

"Where to, sir?" asked the driver.

And Maine hesitated.

"The Albert Hall," he said quietly. "See if you can get me there before the concert finishes."

It was a rush, but a combination of empty thoroughfares and a new taxi succeeded.

Maine entered to find his famous little friend of the morning on the platform approaching the end of the second half of her program. He crept very quietly into a vacant seat and watched her; watched her with an admiration that was tinged with awe. The Albert Hall is not one of the easiest halls in which to sing. The acoustics have drawn sighs from the hearts of singers and auditors alike. It is altogether too tremendous, too spacious. The voice is liable to lose itself and echo disconcertingly in the vastness of the great spaces under the roof.

But Coralie Warden was holding that vast audience as though in the hollow of her cupped hands. She sang as only a goddess of music could sing, with the effortless perfection of tone and timbre that reached sweetly to every nook and corner of the mammoth building. Tier on tier, the wide-swinging circles of faces peered down at her, listening with bated breath to the glorious paeans of song that welled from her throat; line on line, they gazed up at her from the giant floor, like shingles on a wide sea beach, with never a sound and never a movement until the last perfect cadence fell and softly died on the silence.

To Maine, who had been denied the beauties of life so long, it was like the fairy music of silver waters falling in golden fountains. He blessed every single note of it, thrilled to every wondrous moment of it.

To see that sweet figure standing there, alone on the great stage save for the half-seen figures of the violins, playing a huge audience up and up to heights of rhapsody, a bouquet of early, precious roses clasped in her hands, a great diamond tiara flashing in her hair; to hear the thunder of applause burst forth, wave on wave of it, like the crash of storm-combers along the foreshore, to see her standing there with a dainty smile and a series of charming little bows—it went to his head like wine.

Song! It was keeping his soul alive. Memories of the songs he had heard beautifully sung had kept him from going mad during those years of torment on the moors. And there in that delightful girl he saw embodied all he had longed for, hoped for, yearned for in the darkness of the nights that seemed to have no end.

Coralie Warden had sung to too many audiences not to know exactly what they expected of her. Too many capitals had acclaimed her great for her not to know what greatness meant, or how it was achieved. She had kept an especial favourite for them till the last.

Maine sat on with eyes half closed, immersed in a quiet rapture of delight. It was soothing his very soul: after the wild hours and excitement of the day, the fierce life and death interludes that had crowded themselves upon him in one mad outburst after another, Coralie's singing came to him like a restful caress, a few minutes on one of the delectable backwaters of paradise. It was a dream song, sung to dream music.

Vague thoughts began to flit through his mind. He was only half aware of their existence, and yet, in some odd way, he was fully conscious of their wholly unusual nature. This girl on the platform, this utterly adorable little maid, who played with mighty audiences as one might manipulate a pack of cards, was half mesmerising him. He watched her from under half-closed eyelids, his brain a queer jumble of doubts and questioning.

It was more than unusual—it was extraordinary. In some amazing way, by some totally inexplicable alchemy of fate he found himself regarding her as someone very near and dear to him. She was not merely his rescuer, not merely a charming girl whose swift intuitions and deft perceptions had saved him from an embarrassing time with the river police. In a sudden jolt of understanding he realized that she never had been merely that. She was something much nearer, much more precious to his own personal self: there was a delicacy of thought about it, a sweet but strong intimacy that left him a little puzzled and yet completely satisfied. No other thing, or power, on earth, could have given him quite that luxurious feeling of restful exultation. It was as though something preordained, something predestined in the crucibles of Time itself, was slowly and gently explaining its reality to him.

THE mammoth auditorium faded, the great wide sweep of the staring faces blurred and grew fainter as a picture fades on a screen. Even the singer with her song receded, the music with its soft airs and trills grew dim and finally closed. The silence came as gently as twilight comes to distant waters. And through it all Kellard Maine, the man from nowhere, sat on as though in a trance, with his soul groping free and unfettered into the dangerous water of far surmise, wondering, hoping, speeding over countless miles, abolishing time with the ease of a dream thought. He was sailing grandly into the future, the glorious realm

that is boundless, frontierless—and illimitable.

He pictured her by his side, in his own home—that wonderful home he had pictured and painted and perfected during those dreadful years behind the granite walls; he saw her flitting from room to room, saw the delicate fingers arranging flowers, saw her entertaining for him in that quietly delightful way of hers, imagined her in a garden of enchantment from which he himself had banished all care and trouble. And then he pictured her in the quiet of a hushed twilight, with black shadows dancing on the walls like cones of jet to the play of the firelight, she in the far corner of the room by the great piano, singing—with only himself to hear and only himself to praise.

Wonder moments, those, while his soul went winging away on splendid flight. He was hunting for the flaw and failing dismally in his efforts to find it. There was no flaw. A future with Coralie near him would be peerless, without blemish, without a single regret. It would atone in full for all that had gone. All the bitterness, all the old heart-burnings, the acids that had eaten into his very soul would be softly soothed out of existence.

He was dimly aware of a stirring in the packed multitude, a movement in the great throng all about him. As though from the back of his memory he heard the mighty organ suddenly burst into a paean of sound. Kellard Maine groped up to his feet and stood rigid, while curious eyes looked at him from round about.

"Can you beat that?" whispered one to his companion. "Fast alseep through a song like that! The man must have the soul of a rhinoceros."

The National Anthem pealed through to its resonant final chords, and the audience, chattering, talking, criticising every minute of the performance, began the slow crawl through the doors and exits.

Kellard Maine picked his way through tiers of chairs and reached the platform entrance. He sent a little message in to her by a commissionaire and then hung about till the blue and red uniform came in again through the high curtains.

"Miss Warden is anxious to see you, sir," said the messenger. "If you will go round outside to the artists' entrance she will be with you in less than ten minutes."

Maine nodded his thanks and gradually found his way round to what, at the Albert Hall, corresponds to the stage door.

In a few minutes he heard her rippling chuckle as she caught sight of him, making her dainty way through a horde of fervent worshippers.

"So you managed to find it, did you?" she said, her eyes sparkling. The rapture of her reception that night had acted on her like champagne; she was all vivacity, life, bubbling high spirits.

CHAPTER V

THE PHANTOM

HER car drove up, crawling at a snail's pace through the dense masses. Autograph fiends were at work in hundreds, but with her arms full of flowers even the most importunate of them could hardly expect her to satisfy their hobby. Instead, she gave them roses. Bloom after bloom was scattered among them till at last she stood before him empty-handed, save for the one glorious blossom pinned with a diamond on her shoulder—a regal princess, a song-royal princess, laughing and happy in the midst of her people.

The car moved off.

"Seems rather high-handed of me—dragooning you off like this, doesn't it?" she murmured after blowing kisses to the crowd through the window.

"I'd like to be treated in this sweet cavalier fashion for the rest of my life," replied Maine in a far-away voice. "You had a wonderful time tonight, didn't you? Your singing, and the peace of that great hall, went to my head, I think. I—I don't think I heard all your last song."

"Sent you to sleep, did I?" she said, with a merry twinkle.

"No—not to sleep, but right up into the clouds. I think my soul was just faintly visible through a strong pair of binoculars."

She shook a saucy finger at him. "I'm not going to talk about me tonight," she declared. "I want to talk about you! Did you know that dad is just burning with curiosity to meet you?"

"No—why?" Maine jerked the words back with a lump in his throat. If this was Coralie's way of introducing him to her people, he thought it the most charmingly delightful note of the whole evening. For less than a word he would have gone down at her feet and worshipped with the rest of them.

"Well—I told him about my—my rather interesting adventure of this morning," she said. "He is dreadfully jealous of me, you know. But he is still more eager to meet a man who bobbed up in the middle of the Thames without ever having fallen into it! That little point seemed to tickle him no end. He wasn't a bit proud of me for having rescued you—in spite of the police boat—but he certainly is intrigued to know how you got into the water from—

from down below. So I shanghaied you along in the car to meet him."

"And a thousand thanks for the charming compliment," responded Maine.

The car drew up at a well-lighted house. It was one of the great mansions in Park Lane. A liveried butler opened the door to them and Coralie took him through into the library, a beautiful Jacobean room, panelled in oak and priceless tapestry.

"I'll go and fetch dad," she said, with a cheerful smile. "You'll like him, I'm sure."

"You're sure? Or you hope?"

"Well—both, if you like," she answered, and there was a tiny blush on her face as she slipped through the curtains in the doorway.

Maine waited. He heard the sounds of voices from another room. Coralie's and another, a grave, polite and very formal voice. A slight frown crinkled his brows. He almost thought he remembered that voice.

And then the curtains parted.

"Mr. Maine, come along and be introduced to Ada," said Coralie. "You're both eager to meet each other, I—hope."

Maine glanced through the doorway as he went forward. In the middle of his stride he stopped dead, stopped as though a sudden electric shock had petrified every muscle in his body.

The curtains parted again. Standing in the doorway, his hand outstretched to part the curtains, with just the grey shadow of a smile on his face, was Jaan Vorst!

Maine held his breath for what seemed to him an age—an age of wringing, amazing agonies. The muscles of his throat flexed up into a clenching, breathless grip that made him gulp. A hot surge of blood pounded into his temples, filling his brain with its loud, prolonged dinning. A million yelling, pell-mell questions rushed shouting through his head.

This man, this half-caste murderer, with the cheek bones of the Asiatic and the eyes of Nippon, this ghoul in human guise, the father of Coralie! This monster, who planned the death of a whole nation, this loathsome creature the father of that beautiful flower of English girlhood, whose very presence was a charm, whose voice was like the echoes of silver bells heard faintly in the dusk of June? Impossible. Ludicrous, Fantastic. Damnable! The man who merely whispered the idea deserved to be shot out of hand.

FOR one wild moment he gazed at Coralie, as if to reassure himself of an assurance that was already part of his physical being. Erratic thoughts were rattling about in his head like loose stones in an empty box.

As though through a dim mist he saw Vorst advancing towards him, suave, self-possessed, immensely the master of himself, his hand outstretched in a quiet gesture of greeting.

"Good evening, Mr.—ah—I'm afraid I didn't quite get your name," he murmured.

"Mr. Kellard Maine," said the girl quickly, looking hard at Maine.

Maine switched his eyes off her with an effort.

"Ah—of course!" said Vorst, with gentle self-disparagement. "How stupid of me to forget, Coralie, my dear, I shall really have to take your advice and take a course of memory exercises. I do believe it's beginning to play me tricks."

Fierce thoughts loomed at the back of Maine's mind and stuck there, burning like red-hot cinders. He was aware of Coralie's puzzled eyes turned on him in a disapproving frown. He knew that for once in his life he had completely lost his grip on himself, almost lost his head and made a fool of himself. But the thing had come as such a thunderbolt that he had been knocked right off his balance. His mental self was groping about independently, trying valiantly to stabilize a foothold. He didn't even know that he was holding his hand out.

Vorst smiled as their hands met. "So awfully kind of you to come round at this unconscionable hour," he said. "Coralie," turning to the girl, "it was nothing more than imposing on his sense of obligation. Why—it's after eleven o'clock; a disgraceful time at which to expect a guest to consent to come."

Maine heard himself murmuring, "Oh, not at all—not at all. Please don't mention it. I'm delighted to be here."

"Are you really? That's awfully kindly put," said Vorst, with a quizzical lift of the eyebrows.

Then Maine got his contacts through. He pulled himself up with a jolt. In a few seconds he was back on his own pedestal of cold authority, mentally chiding himself for his bad break.

"Yes," he said, "I've been really eager to meet you!"

"Ever since when?" Vorst smiled.

"Ever since this morning, sir, when your wonderful daughter fished me out of an excessively unpleasant stretch of water. I assure you that had it not been for her, a thoroughly water-logged corpse would have been nudging the mud of Sheerness by now."

"Well, of course, if you're going to begin throwing entirely gratuitous bouquets about—there is nothing left for an embarrassed recipient to do but retire in blushing confusion." Coralie, with a tinge of pleasing colour on her cheeks, turned when she got to the great velvet

curtains by the door. "Anyhow," she said mischievously, "I expect you two he-men would rather have a chat in your own masculine way. I'll tell Dassi to bring you in the tantalus. You'll excuse me, Mr Maine, won't you?"

Maine bowed; Coralie pushed through the curtains and the latch of the door clicked.

The two men eyed each other stiffly, Maine with every sense keyed up and alert for signs of one of those subtle moves of which Jaan Vorst was a past master. Vorst himself had lost not a line of his calm serenity of bearing. The tall figure still retained its hunched slouch over the shoulders, and the arms hung limply at his sides. There was a looseness about them that was almost simian. It flashed across Maine's mind just then that there was something undeniably ape-like about the whole appearance of the brute. He was a human gorilla. His absolute indifference to pity, to fear and the presence of danger was positively animal.

"I knew it was you she fished out of the river this morning," Vorst said His words were not so much the enunciation of something he wanted to say as the opening of the battle. It was a challenge more than a mere statement of fact.

"You mean you—you sent for me?" queried Maine.

Vorst inclined his head slightly from the perpendicular "I received information that my low temperature forcing houses were flooded out," he said gently. "It will take weeks to restore them to utility. You are running a grave risk, young man."

Maine advanced a single threatening step. "Enough of this damned foolery!" he said.

Vorst's eyebrows went up in pained surprise. "Please! Please!" he murmured. "Not so loud. I'd regret to have to call the household servants to kick you out."

Maine's arm flicked out and clamped like a steel wrench on the yellow wrist.

"Who is that girl?" he hissed.

"Miss Coralie Warden," said Vorst imperturbably.

"You dare to tell me you are the father of—of that sweet child?" Maine's eyes were glittering, like frosted glass.

"Parenthood is not a crime in these delightful islands of yours, is it?"

"You lying devil! You're not her father. She's not your daughter. You know it."

Vorst did not reply. He was looking down, with something almost approaching a whimsical smile on his face, at his disengaged hand. Maine's eyes dropped, too, in a sudden furtive downward dive. There was something in that hand, something that glittered and threw back the light of the ruby lamp in dancing pinpoints of coloured fire. The barrel was huge and slightly conical. The shining coils of a steel spring, terrifically compressed, bulged in a squat line underneath it Vorst's forefinger was crooked round the trigger. The muzzle, a small black triangle, was pointing directly into Maine's face.

"A gun," said Vorst in a flat, calm monotone, and waved the thing sombrely before Maine's eyes. "A gun of a somewhat unusual character. The barrel, you'll notice, tapers a little, and is triangular. The trigger is a hair-spring release. There is no explosive in it, though—and no bullet."

Maine slowly released the imprisoned wrist.

"Thank you," said Vorst. "It is another way of teaching a fool the wisdom of discretion. Kyne died, of course? I heard you were telephoned for."

Maine could have strangled him for that. The inhumanity of the man appalled him.

"Yes," he said, savagely quiet. "At five o'clock."

"And Scotland Yard is called in?"

"This house will be surrounded fifteen minutes after I leave it."

"After you leave it?" Vorst seemed to turn the words over slowly on his tongue, like a connoisseur tasting the finer flavour of old wine. "*After* you leave it. I see you are wise enough to qualify the assertion. You may take it from me, you will never leave it."

MAINE smiled grimly. "I seem to remember the threat—it's an old one—one that you have used to me before: and on rather more than one occasion, I think. You couldn't hold me here, Vorst, not if you had half the Chinese Empire strung out round the grounds. You couldn't hold me with the gallows. You couldn't hold me with poisoned air inside granite walls under the Thames. I don't think a Park Lane mansion will hold me longer than I care to stay."

"Then why not go now?" suggested Vorst solicitously.

"Not yet, grunted Maine. "I want to know quite a lot of things before I quit here. In the first place—your name. You must have a name. And you're not such an all-fired fool as to be running under the old colours—not after getting a man put away for having murdered that name. You've got tradesmen who call on you, banking accounts, a correspondence circle, financial connections. The tax collector gives you a periodic round-up, you've got a place on the voting registers. You've got a name all right—and I want to know it."

"You do! Why?"

"For twenty-eight different reasons. Quite

a small one of which is that it will be of vast assistance in investigating, and tracing your subsequent movements—if any."

"Well, have a long shot."

"I suppose you have the effrontery to call yourself Warden?"

Vorst nodded ponderously.

"Valmar Warden," he explained smoothly. "Father of Coralie, tenant of this mansion at six thousand pounds a year, quoted in the Post Office Guide and Telephone Directory, recorded as such at Somerset House and on the Motor Car License Registers. Valmar Warden is the name, young sir, a name which I shall have no further use for—from now on. I make you a present of it, here and now. I shall not have need of it again."

Maine ignored the quiet banter.

"Sounds all right—taken at a gulp, he said. "But there's a flaw in it, a break in the line, somewhere—the ends don't meet."

"That so?"

"Well, take a look at it from my end. Miss Warden is between twenty-five and twenty-six years of age or I'm blind. I've been away for fifteen years. Fifteen from twenty-six is eleven. That girl who you say is your daughter was eleven years old when I faced the judge on a charge of murdering you. And you were single in those days: a bachelor running under your own name of Jaan Vorst. Your age at most, I'd say, would have been twenty-eight or nine—devilish young to have a daughter of eleven. Over and above which you had been in the country only about five years."

"Well?"

"There's a hiatus of eleven years, that's all. A bit singular, to say the least, isn't it? And so damn silly to tell lies which a child could see through."

Vorst looked at him significantly. "A lot has happened since this morning," he said. "Think how much more can happen in the space of fifteen years. Considerably more than the successful identification of myself as Valmar Warden, father of Coralie Warden, the 'Nightingale of Ten Capitals.' Meanwhile, contemplate this little instrument of mine—"

"I'm not interested in your lethal playthings. I want to know how it is that in fifteen years an Asiatic bachelor becomes the male parent of a twenty-six year old English girl. Apart from the abnormalities of the racial product, there is still the trifling discrepancy of eleven years to be accounted for. Will you please explain?"

Vorst did not turn a hair. "This gun," he resumed, "shoots a poison. It is not very deadly, it merely leaves its mark for life. The poison is precipitated into the skin by force. It consolidates itself within thirty seconds; and to the best of my knowledge, there is no known antidote.

"My special forte, you will have noted, is the crossmating of certain germ cultures. In this gun is a charge of my newest creation—a fusion of malignant eczema and surface leprosy. A discharge of this in your face would rob it of some of that healthy masculine tan which"—he smiled grimly again—"seems to be such an asset to you among the ladies."

"All this," said Maine frostily, "is very interesting, but it doesn't interest *me!*"

"You think not?"

"No." Maine glanced at his watch. "It is now eleven-fifteen. I have an appointment with Sir Everard Lewis, the head of Scotland Yard C.I.D., at a quarter to midnight. If I am not there to time he is to phone me here—at Miss Coralie Warden's address. Failing a reply, he is to drive here and wait for me. I am an indispensable witness of his. He will not wait long. Say, by midnight he will be getting impatient. By a quarter past he will be making a few inquiries.

"You may take it for granted, Vorst, that he will not go away without having a private interview with Miss Warden. She being known to him by the depositions I have already made in this case. You may also take it for granted that Miss Warden will not tell a sheaf of intuitive lies in order to cover your association with me. She will tell him, with all the frank candor that is part of her nature, that I have been here with you this evening. And that I was last seen alone with you in this room."

"You have learned a few lessons, Mr. Maine, since we last crossed swords." There was almost a note of admiration in Vorst's tone.

"You'll need to size up a hand equally quickly in this present encounter," said Maine. "And now, having tabled our respective leads, would you be good enough to explain to me exactly what relationship you hold to Coralie?"

VORST looked at him skeptically. "May I inquire why this sudden solicitude on her behalf?" he asked.

"This is why," cut in Maine. "With Scotland Yard on my side I've got you where I want you. And I swear to Heaven that I won't let up on you till I see you swinging from the gallows. Thief, plunderer, murderer, the only fit place for you is the gibbet. The tally against you is long—and growing. These, to my definite knowledge. The un-

known man in the Birkenhead Infirmary, Sir Wilbert Hartigan, Mr. Justice Vallis and Sergeant Kyne of the river police. Four deliberate, callous murders, beside the fifteen years you've cut out of my life, and the millions more you are now planning to kill. That is why. If you are her father—it will make a difference."

"Will it indeed—and why?"

"To a creature of your instincts it would be too delicate a distinction for your appreciation, too subtle to get through your inhumanity. You wouldn't understand if I wrote it down in black and white—or drew it out in a series of graphs."

"No?" Vorst fingered the gun and looked at Maine out of half-closed eyes. "You think I don't appreciate the inferences when a youngish man of a certain handsomeness of feature is rescued by an exceptionally pretty and gifted girl from an uncomfortable situation some time before midday, and is to be located in her own home some time before midnight? Eh? Do you think I'm so wrapped up in my larger engagements that I can't follow the incipient notions of a young fool like you, fresh out of jail, going head over heels out of his senses over the first pretty face he meets?"

"Without the slightest doubt, you are right. There is a certain type of individual whose perceptions are such and whose ideals are so definitely formed that he knows, the moment he meets a particular girl, that that is the type he has been unconsciously looking for all his life. I'm one of those individuals. All else being equal, I shall devote the remainder of my leisure hours to her better acquaintance."

The corners of Vorst's mouth creased into the semblance of an ugly grin.

"And let me advise you, young man, to keep off other people's preserves," he said.

"Oh, of course, there is that about it. If Miss Warden would rather I did not see her again—there's the end of it. I would be the last to embarrass her."

"Then put on your hat and go home!" Vorst's voice was an ominous rumble.

Maine screwed his eyes up quickly to the clock.

"I think you're wrong," he said blandly. "A girl can say the deuce of a lot without saying a word. Miss Warden has said quite a lot to me already. To me, the chief difficulty is you!"

"My sincere regrets." The rumble gave way to pure sarcasm.

"Yes—it will be a little awkward for me to have to send her own father to the hangman's rope, which is the end I have definitely mapped out for you. You are precious near it right now. Government analysts are already at work on your poisons."

Vorst displayed a show of puzzled interest.

"That food you prepared for me down in the submarine cellar," explained Maine, "I took the liberty of taking a few samples of it away with me. Butter and bread and cheese and meat and water. Quite a comprehensive assortment. The scientists are disintegrating them now in the government laboratories."

Vorst rubbed his chin reflectively. "It is just as well I sent for you," he muttered.

"Pace getting too hot?"

Vorst shrugged. "It does not matter," he said. "You poor fool! You think you have me cornered here? You, with your bumptious rats from Scotland Yard; do you think you give me a moment's uneasiness at night? This movement from the East is organized to brush such small obstacles as Scotland Yard out of existence. Sir Everard Lewis—bah! By this time tomorrow night he will be solving all the riddles of death for himself.

"The campaign is already opened. You will open your papers in the morning to read of the mysterious epidemics breaking out in isolated districts in these islands. Localities where the population is thin and scattered, where medical help is insufficient to cope with anything more than the average toll of illness—these are the places whence the reports will come.

"They are merely the initial experiments, tryouts for the great offensive to be launched as soon as the results are known and the effects proved. Your fool press will do all the donkey work for me. They will work it up into a scare. Special correspondents will go out. They will investigate and seek out all the details. And the papers will print it and keep me posted in all that happens. My data will be complete without me having to waste a single hour on the verification of details."

"You forget Sir Everard outside."

"I forget nothing. That is why I am at the head of this organization. Neither you nor Sir Everard can check me. In Canton they call me the Phantom. In the Treaty Ports I'm the Shadow. Just when it suits me I shall be out of this house. And not all the hounds of Scotland Yard on the trail together will find me. Do you think Jaan Vorst is the only identity I have established? There are a dozen niches in London into which I can fit myself in ten minutes—all planned out and prepared for such an emergency as this."

"And Coralie?"

"Coralie will know nothing except that her father has gone hurriedly on one of his

periodical business visits to the East. This one will be a little more prolonged than most. Valmar Warden will cease to exist. In another part of London a new figure will slide into an old name—and the movement will proceed without interruption."

"Many thanks for the information."

"I merely tell you to flatter your own vanity. Your colossal egotism prompts me to show you how futile, how infinitesimal are your prospects of defeating me. I tell you this as a salve to it. It will do you no good. You will not even—"

The sentence was never finished. Vorst's head suddenly went rocketing back to the terrific smash of a right-hand fist. It took him clean in the teeth and knocked him flying, with an agonized gasp, against the table. At the same moment Maine's left arm shot out and grabbed at the poison gun. He wrenched it round and jerked it upward. There was a tiny click, and Vorst squealed. The gun was still tangled up among his thin yellow fingers, but two of them were broken. He was staring down helplessly into the unwinking orifice of the black triangle, and Maine was feeling for the trigger. The horrible weapon was pointing full into the yellow face. Vorst's eyes were staring, almost popping out of his head. And Maine, with the pent-up strength of a young bull, was half on top of him, his right arm hooked round Vorst's head like a steel band, holding him motionless over the table.

"Don't—don't pull that trigger, you fool!"

THE words jerked into Maine's ear in a hoarse whisper. There was deadly fright in every syllable of them. The Death Maker was staring sheer down into the black triangle of his own gun.

"Futile and infinitesimal prospects have been known to win out!" Maine's answer was hard as cast iron, pitiless as a Northland blizzard. His forefinger was only an inch from the trigger, and his hand was forcing its way up over the bent wrist inexorably, with the strength of a machine. Vorst's free hand clutched at it in maddened frenzy.

"And you think you'll creep into any new identity you choose to assume, do you? Think you'll be able to slip out into the night and lose yourself so thoroughly that all Scotland Yard couldn't find you? Not with your face marked for life with malignant eczema, you swine!"

"Don't!"

Maine's finger reached the trigger. Vorst tried to screw his head out of range with a violent effort, but the rigid arm behind his neck held him.

"Quick," snapped Maine, "what is Coralie to you?"

"I—I took her when she was a baby." Vorst's livid mouth gasped the words out.

"You've made her *think* you're her father?"

"Yes. She was an orphan. I sent her to be educated in a French convent."

"Where they discovered the beauty of her voice?"

"Yes—yes."

"And you've been living on it ever since then?"

Vorst gasped out a strangled "Yes." And Maine deliberately pulled the trigger.

The gun kicked in his hand, and a grey cloud shot from it full into the terror-filled face. It impacted with the force of a blank cartridge fired from a revolver. Vorst staggered back half stunned, his hand upflung to his burning face. Maine glimpsed it for a moment as the hands went up. It was covered thick with a whitish dust, fine as the finest ground powder. The skin was covered with it, painting the face to the semblance of Chinese white. It was in the skin, in the eyebrows and the soft membranes of the eyes—blown into the roots of the hair above the forehead.

Then the hands covered the face and there was something that Maine did not see—the wicked glittering grin across the mouth beneath the shielding palms.

Vorst swayed back against a great armchair. The armchair pushed against the table, and a glazed photograph fell over with a crash of broken glass.

At the same moment there was a soft, muffled thud by the door.

Maine wheeled like a cat. Coralie, a limp, pathetic little bundle of bewildered femininity, had fallen fainting on the floor. The curtains were still agitated by her fall.

Maine stood and stared, while the full tally of realisation coursed violently through his brain. Coralie had never left that room; had never gone through the door. She had remained hidden behind the great folds of the velvet drapings and had heard every damning word they had said.

For a minute he stood irresolute, trying to hamstring his own thoughts, trying to remember some of the devastating things he had just said. Vorst was mouthing like a hurt animal in the corner, rocking from side to side on the arm of the chair. She must have heard even the noise of the poison gun, discharging its horrors into Vorst's helpless face.

Maine hurried over to her. She was in a death-like faint, her face ashen white, the tips of her slender fingers trembling against the carpet. For a moment Maine saw only the

pathos of it—a girl, who with roguish mischief had hidden behind the curtain to hear what her new, sudden lover had to say about her, had been forced to listen to every bitter, terrifying word. Fate had conspired to make her an innocent eavesdropper on two men, one her alleged father, the other her undoubted lover, stringing vicious words into the phrases of a life and death feud of such relentless ferocity that the knowledge of it had stunned her. Shock had piled on shock to such an extent that the overwrought nerves had given away.

For the first time in her life she had received some inkling of the awful web of mystery and devilry that surrounded her.

She lay on the floor like a dead thing, her bosom barely moving.

Maine picked her up with an effortless swing of the arms and laid her gently in a huge leather armchair. He sprinkled her forehead with water from the carafe and went over to Vorst.

The Death Maker had sunk into the chair, his hands still covering his face. He made no further sound. The man might almost have been dead. Only the shiny, bone-whiteness of his knuckle-tips showed the muscles were still tense.

"How do you like that kind of gruel?" asked Maine, looking down at him. "Having invented the poison, you'll now have the pleasure of inventing your own antidote. It will keep your murderous mind busy for a day or two, anyhow."

He regarded him for a moment. Vorst did not move.

"One other thing," went on Maine remorselessly. "In this game of dog eat dog you don't want to take too much notice of what the other fellow says. Sir Everard Lewis will not be phoning for me tonight. Neither will he be waiting for me outside. As yet Sir Everard has not even seen me. It was a long shot, fired out of your own gun. But it served. It bestows on me the pleasant knowledge that even Jaan Vorst is not invulnerable. That's all. Good night. I'd like to make my adieu before Miss Warden regains consciousness.

"She has heard me say quite a lot of indiscreet things about her tonight and a further meeting would be—awkward, not to say difficult. It would be much better to let her rest awhile. She will have to think things out for herself now. I'll tell your butler that you wish to be undisturbed for an hour. That will give you time to make suitable arrangements regarding Miss Warden. It will also hold you here till I get Scotland Yard on your heels."

He wheeled and, with a final glance at Coralie, walked quietly out of the door.

THE moment he was gone Jaan Vorst looked round.

Maine had closed the door behind him, and Coralie was still immobile in the great chair. There was a sinister glitter in his eyes, but across his mouth was a leering grin in which a glint of bad-tempered humor found place.

He picked up the house telephone.

"That you, Dassi?" he called softly. "Kellard Maine has just left this room. He will be going out of the front door right now. Follow him. Fix him. Don't let him get near a telephone box—get him before he gets back to his hotel. If Maine gets through to Scotland Yard it means clearing out of here within five minutes—all the lot of us. We shall have to clear before dawn, anyhow—the girl knows all about it and she may make trouble. I can keep her quiet for tonight—a touch of the needle will keep her sleeping till the morning. After that I can promise nothing. Get Maine before he leaves this house, if possible. You can fix him without risk. Nobody knows he is here."

Vorst put the receiver down, and then, with a flowery silk handkerchief, he wiped the clotted powder from his face, and then with infinite care washed off the insulating film of protective grease that covered his skin.

He poured himself a glass of whisky and raised it to his lips. "To the many interesting hours Scotland Yard will spend looking for the man with the blemished face," he said. "Mr. Maine, old birds don't fall for imitation traps."

He drained off the whisky at a draught and put the glass down. For a moment he stood there, tonguing his palate speculatively, a single dark line of puzzled curiosity chiseled across his forehead. He licked his lips and looked down hurriedly at the decanter.

Queer; he seemed to remember that the stopper was out before he poured that drink out. It was lying there on the blue and gold table runner, a great glass ball that flashed red in the light of the lamp. Very unusual. Somebody must have removed that stopper since he came into the room. And that clinging, lingering taste on his tongue. What— He put out his hand to the bottle, a curious look spreading slowly over his cold features.

His hand never reached the bottle. It seemed to go hard as stone when only halfway there. He tried to force himself to make the hand complete the journey, but there was something wrong with it. It was not responding to the fierce dictates of his brain. It was nerveless, senseless, a thing carved in olive-coloured stone. Jaan Vorst began to sweat at the temples. The other hand, too, the one leaning against the table, was slowly going

void of feeling. A cold, numbing sensation was crawling up his arm, prickling the skin as it progressed.

And then the colourings of the room began to fade on his vision. It was all going white, misty. A vague glare of fear shot into his eyes. Cloudy, half-obscure shapes were moving erratically about: the room itself seemed to be swaying, lurching, trying to topple him off his legs.

He opened his mouth and shouted, a long-drawn cry: "Dassi! Quickly!" Thin, red points of fire danced into the dim fog of white. Realisation swept over his burning brain. That devil, Kellard Maine. He had done it. Caught him in a trap too slick even for Vorst to have seen. An iceberg seemed to be forming in his lungs. Hell's own overdose of cocaine, that's what he had soaked into that bottle. The murderous hound. He had played with his imitation trap for half an hour, then caught him with the real one on the way out.

The whiteness suddenly charged out of his brain and a wall of utter blackness descended. Then even the blackness vanished and Jaan Vorst went over with a crash.

Kellard Maine, with his ear pressed close to the keyhole, listened, smiled frigidly to himself, and then tiptoed to the landing.

He peered over the massive balustrade, every nerve and sense alive and fighting. Below was a pool of dim light shed from clusters of small lamps set like a luminous grapevine over the walls. In the centre glowed a beautiful electric candelabra, a great inverted cone of glittering sparkles that shimmered like a radiant cloud.

All was silent as a sepulchre. There was not even the scrape of a boot from the servants' quarters below.

He leaned over the woodwork and his chill eyes surveyed the scene. He quartered the ground foot by foot, peering intently at the towering antler hatstand, behind the fall of the stairs, at the tapestry curtains that divided the wide reception hall, at the tall overcoat wardrobe against the wall. Anywhere and everywhere a human body might shelter itself in readiness for an ambush.

But there was neither sight nor sound of anyone. The place seemed utterly deserted, lonely with the oppressive loneliness of a place in which humans had once been, but long since fled. It was like a broken mausoleum, in which invisible ghosts seemed to be waiting for the desecrator to show himself.

For reasons that he could not define, Maine slowly turned his eyes towards a tall gilt mir-

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ror, let into the wall on the opposite side of the floor. For a moment he could see nothing. Yet the great mirror seemed to hold his attention hypnotically. He went over its surface inch by inch, hunting among the dark reflections there. Then there was just the tiniest movement in the glass—and he saw.

Someone was standing, back behind the angle of the staircase, waiting. He was dressed all in black and his face was very dark. The whole ensemble of unrelieved black had rendered him almost invisible in the mirror. He was standing in the darkest part of the hallway and against the drab background of the dark oak wall there was nothing to throw his figure into relief. The glint of a revolver had given him away.

Maine watched him, drawing back from the balustrade till he could only just keep the reflection in view. The man was in an attitude of tense listening. His head was bent forward a little in a motionless effort of concentration, his hands hanging limp at his sides and his ear half turned to the stairs. A single sparkle from one of the prisms on the great candelabra had caught a reflective gleam from the nickel of the hanging gun.

From where he was, he would be able to remain completely out of sight until Maine had reached the hatstand. Then in two silent steps he could be up behind him, cracking the gun-butt down on his skull. The whole thing could be done as noiselessly as the action of a perfectly rehearsed screen episode.

The seconds ticked by, ponderous as the tolling of a bell. The man seemed to have the colossal patience of a sphinx. Maine accepted the obvious inference of his identity. It was apparently Dassi—something of the Hindu about the name, he thought; and the face, at all events, was dark enough to be Pathan. He must have heard the fall of his master's body on the floor above and, caught between two fires, was undecided as to his course of action—whether to obey his orders and wait for Maine down there, or to go up and investigate the cause of that disconcerting fall.

Vorst's statement had been definite. Maine had heard it himself. "Kellard Maine has just left this room." That was decisive. There was no getting away from that. His master was hardly likely to have been fooled or bluffed into saying a thing like that unless it were a statement of cold fact. Maine could almost follow the train of thought in the puckered brows . . . if Maine had left that room, why hadn't he arrived downstairs? And why that bump on the floor overhead?

Was it Maine or Vorst who had gone down? If it was Vorst, there could only be one explanation. Maine must have gone back and caught him napping. It seemed that the whole situation called for something more decisive than a mere waiting game down there in the darkness and uncertainty of the stair recess.

Dassi seemed to decide on an executive line of action. Maine heard the click of the trigger going back on the half-cock. Dassi was going up to investigate. Maine drew back and crept across the landing. At the head of the stairs was a huge grandfather clock, ticking as loudly and as monotonously as a cricket on the hearth. Maine squeezed himself behind it, and waited.

Dassi came up the stairs, lithe as a panther. Maine could hear the soft thud of his felted shoes on the treads. He appeared round the bend of the landing, holding the revolver a little in front of him, his eyes peering cautiously round the corner of the wall. He was within two yards of the man behind the clock, too feverishly intent on what might lie in wait for him behind that door even to notice the risk that was jogging at his elbow.

He began to creep across the landing. Maine waited till he came abreast of him and then gave the clock a gentle push. It swayed and began to fall. Instantly the ticking stopped and the heavily weighted pendulum bumped gently against the inside of the door. Dassi turned with a startled gasp to see the tall clock falling upon him, the faintly white clock-face within a foot of his own.

With an instinctive action of self-preservation he put out his hands to ward it off. The clock fell against them and he held it, his body braced out like a prop against its falling further. In that brief second Dassi was powerless. Maine stepped calmly to one side and wrenched the revolver from the helpless hand.

It was all over in a second. The thing worked so smoothly and with such perfect simplicity that it verged on the ludicrous. Dassi was too amazed, too utterly astonished even to squeal a frightened warning. The butt of the gun came down with a violent thud on the flat of his temple. The clock, the gun, the stairs, the landing and everything in radius of his vision gave one convulsive jolt at the base of his brain and he slid down with a gurgling sigh to the carpet.

Maine thrust his shoulder against the clock and shoved it back against the wall. He canted it over to start the pendulum swinging again, and then slipped quietly down the stairs.

All was quiet and still in the hallway. A Dresden clock on an ebony stand began the musical chime of midnight, little silver strokes that tinkled on the silence with startling clarity.

Kellard Maine whisked his hat off the point of a giant antler and let himself out.

CHAPTER VI

THE MYSTERY DISEASES

THE next morning Maine was awakened by a loud knocking on his door. A youthful voice informed him from outside that a messenger awaited him in the hall, and desired an urgent meeting with him.

"Chinese-looking chap, is he?" demanded Maine.

"No, sir. A big man, very broad-shouldered. Sounded a bit Scotch to me."

"Send him up," said Maine, and unbolted his door.

The man came in a minute or two later, an officer of the plainclothes department. It was a notable fact that he hadn't a single line to say about the weather.

"You Mr. Kellard Maine?" he inquired.

"Late of Dartmoor, officer. Expecting a communication from headquarters at any moment. That the Kellard Maine you mean?"

"That's the one, sir. And I'm the communication. We wouldn't use the phone, sir; the chief regards the whole case as far too serious. Between you and me and that door knob, he's half scared out of his life. Seen the papers this morning?"

"Only just opened my eyes."

The officer shot a whole sheaf of dailies on to the bed.

"Take a look at that little lot, sir, and you'll see why the chief is stepping like a cat on hot bricks. Looks like being a daisy of a case, if I may say so."

"You may. And now, I suppose, having turned up his nose at me for weeks, Sir Everard is falling over himself to see me and get the facts?"

"Just as soon as you can get round to the Yard, sir. He impresses on you the importance of speed. Even minutes are precious on involved cases like this."

"You bet your life they are," grunted Maine, heaving up in bed. "Pity Lewis didn't realise it before the pot boiled over. I might—but that won't help much—and I've got beyond feeling piqued, anyway. Is the chief waiting at the Yard for me now?"

"Yes, sir. He's been at it all night. Hasn't let up a minute since your last message."

"H'm! Have any luck last night?"

"Not a scrap anywhere. It was after midnight before you came through. A Flying Squad van was round at Park Lane within twelve minutes. Eleven men surrounded the house while five others forced the doors. They toured every room, from top to bottom. Not a sign of a living soul in the whole house. Damn queer. They must have made their getaway while you were in the call-box. There's three men in possession round there now, togged up as house decorators to disarm the curious. An exhaustive search has been going on there all night, cellar-hunting, wall-tapping, floor-raising, all the whole rigmarole. But there's not even a smell of 'em. The whole lock, stock and barrel of 'em just folded up their tents and vanished. Poof! Like that." The plainclothes man blew a whiff of imaginary smoke into the air and dissipated it with a swish of his hand. "You cleared off, didn't you, after the police arrived?" he added.

Maine did not answer the question. He was looking at the officer blankly.

"Do you mean there was no one at all found in any of those rooms last night?" he questioned.

"Not even the thin half of the shadow of a ghost, sir."

"Not—not a young girl, in a dead faint—on a big chair up on the first floor—the library?"

"Not a soul." The officer's tone left not the slightest room for doubt.

"Good Lord! Why, I left Vorst flat out on the floor, with enough cocaine in his system to keep him half-petrified for twenty-four hours. And—and Dassi, the footman, he was coiled up all round himself with a dint in his skull the size of a Wesson gun butt."

"Can't help that, sir. Park Lane sprang a hell of a leak last night. The rats smelled a sinking ship—and cleared out. The hunt for Vorst begins all over again—right from midnight last night. You're the only one who knows anything definite about the hoodlum.

"That's why the chief wants you more than he wants anything else on earth. The poison plot has already opened fire. Vorst is already making his opening moves, exactly as you said he would over the wire last night. The chief is hopping up and down his room like a kitten in a puddle—doesn't know what to do with himself for the best. Damn near drove the whole crowd of us dotty this morning. Slammed thirty plainclothes men out on the job as soon as he got the hang of it. *Thirty!* My stars! It's the biggest ever. Chinatown is having the darnedest time of its life. All the B. Division are down there—all the whole creation of them—going through on a house to house parade with a currycomb and a pile of warrants as long as your arm.

"They ain't missing so much as a cockroach. They've rounded up forty opium runners, unearthed half a hundred little gambling bethels and raked in a score of old-timers they've been hunting for years. But

they havn't got Vorst—nor a single one of his bunch. That's the whole miracle of it. That gang is organized down to the last full stop in the whole book of rules. His crowd didn't even get into the picture. They're fade-outs. They got through—somehow. And the chief is dancing mad about it."

MAINE rubbed the back of his right ear and tried to think things out. But the job had got beyond him. He couldn't conceive how anything could have misfired after the way he had left things in that Park Lane mansion overnight. Still less could he make out what had become of Coralie.

He fingered a newspaper abstractedly.

"Read that one," said the officer. "And see if you wouldn't be all of a dither if you were the chief."

Maine switched the paper open and began to read. It was the *Morning News,* a journal that made a daily boast of the completeness of its news service. The *News* editorial thought the matter so remarkable that they made it their second lead. It was given big black headlines and a special introduction. The splash-head was *Mystery Diseases.*

"Three different outbreaks of poisoning were reported simultaneously last night from widely divergent parts of the country. There are several aspects of the matter that tend to make it unique in the annals of British medical history. The first is that each outbreak has occurred in localities where the population is thin and scattered—making the speedy receipt of medical attention a practical impossibility. The second is that the areas affected are in the extreme north, east and west of England. And the third, and by far the most extraordinary of all, is that in each instance the actual malady appears to defy medical diagnosis. The local doctors confess themselves unable to prescribe for the outbreak.

"In the Yorkshire wolds a little community of the typical sheep-tending class is suffering acutely from an affection which, at first glance, strongly resembles ptomaine poisoning. Over forty individuals, men, women and children, were stricken down between four p.m. and midnight, the date of the latest available statistics. The only two doctors within normal reach of the hamlets concerned were immediately rushed to the spot, and have been working ceaselessly ever since.

"Other doctors and nursing staffs are being hurried into the area by the Ministry of Health, which apparently takes a serious view of the matter. The two resident doctors are puzzled to know the exact nature of the infection. So far they have definitely established the fact that it is *not* ptomaine. Although all the outward visible signs of ptomaine are present the internal symptoms are entirely different. The malady appears to yield to no known treatment. Samples of the local drinking water and of certain made-up foods are being rushed to London for official analysis.

"Within ten minutes of the foregoing incident being reported to the Health Ministry, information of an almost similar outbreak came to light from Ledminster, a telegraph office in the heart of the Lincoln fen country. Over fifty cases are already reported. Again the similarities are remarkable. Ledminster is really only a name. There is no village at all. It is practically nothing but the tiny post office and a general store—a mail-collecting and distributing centre for all the neighbourhood around; the population is scattered over an area of about thirty square miles.

"Fen-fishing and the hiring of small boats on the creeks and rivers forms the sole means of sustenance for the sparse population. In this instance there is only one doctor, who is also unable to diagnose the exact nature of the outbreak. The medico, a Dr. Hanrahan, who knows every one of his patients personally and helped to bring most of them into the world, is utterly unable to advance a theory of any sort.

"He is amazed at the several abnormalities of the occurrence, for the fen dwellers are hardy folks and throw off illness with sturdy ease. The Ledminster outbreak resembles nothing so much as typhoid: and this was the fever Dr. Hanrahan first diagnosed and prescribed for. But it soon became apparent that, though it looked like typhoid, it certainly was no such thing, not even a fever at all, but a distinct organic poison. So far efforts to establish its nature have failed.

"The third report, received early this morning, comes from the Devon moorlands, the heart of Exmoor. Here the outbreak at first appeared to be a virulent form of enteric, but again the diagnosis has been hurriedly changed to that of a toxic of the blood. Just what it is the medical authorities cannot say. So far thirty-seven cases have been reported, but the population is so scattered and isolated that it is more than possible that several cases have not yet been reported."

Then in the stop press column came the sinister addenda:

"MYSTERY DISEASES
FATAL CASES BEGINNING
TO APPEAR
HEALTH MINISTRY ANXIOUS

At an early hour this morning seven deaths have been reported to the Ministry of Health

from the Ledminster district, six from the Fens, and two from Exmoor. The Health Ministry has adopted the extraordinary course of refusing any further information. For latest developments, see tonight's *Evening Mail.*"

Maine read through them all. Newspaper after newspaper rustled open, was swiftly scanned and tossed aside. Since all the reports originated from the agencies, the stories varied in nothing but the actual wording. The method of presenting the news altered slightly here and there according to the style, pomp or blather of the paper concerned, but the facts remained identical; the details were the same in every case.

It was the first showing of a scare story, a story guaranteed to get bigger before the night arrived. Vorst had opened his campaign. The first deaths had already fallen to him. The battle had begun.

Maine searched eagerly for signs of editorial intuition of something far greater, of something of far more serious import behind the bald statements of fact. It was just possible that some god in his machine, some genius sitting back in his chair with his highly complex organization all around him and the thunder of the great presses above him, might have read deeper into the three stories and detected the ominous possibility of the horror that lurked behind it all.

The rest would have been a finger jabbed on a bell button, a special correspondent sent off hotfoot to each of the affected areas and, in all probability, a deftly worded leader pointing out the possibility of deliberate criminal intentions behind the mere statements of the outbreaks.

But so far the ruling brains of Fleet Street had suspected nothing. Perhaps the whole plot was too vast, too seemingly incredible for even their sensation-seeking faculties to grasp. Maine was relieved to know it. For that day at least the truth was safe. Maine knew that if the public once got wind of the true facts England would be in a state of panic in twenty-four hours. People would be afraid to buy food, afraid to eat even what they had already bought. Whole communities would be too frightened to drink even tap-water for fear that the springs themselves were polluted.

The result would be that only those commodities grown of the earth itself—fruit and market-garden produce—could be eaten with any hope of immunity. Famine would raise its ghastly head in the land. Whole towns would starve in the midst of plenty . . . and the concomitants of mass panic were too dreadful even to think about.

There was no time to lose.

MAINE realized that the only hope of safety was a round table of editorial interests. Once the newspapers got wind of the truth, nothing would keep the story out of type. Highly trained investigators would be at work in a twinkling. There is nothing like the possibility of a new and startling scoop to pull every atom of ability and genius out of the specials. They would get at the truth though money flowed like water. But so far the public was safe in their own ignorance. The rest was up to Scotland Yard—and the great dailies.

Kellard Maine put the last paper down and turned a caustic eye on the detective.

"Looks like being a long job, sir," said the man from the Yard with slow deliberation.

"Wouldn't have lasted ten minutes if your people had listened to me in the first place," said Maine sourly, throwing off the bedclothes. Ponderous utterances such as that, after all his earnest counsels, irritated him.

"True, but not helpful," returned the detective. "I'd suggest action. You can kick us all you like—you're entitled to, but do it after we've got the bridle on Vorst."

Maine was out of bed and hunting for bath towels and dressing gown.

The Yard man watched him cautiously for a moment or two and then cleared his throat.

"By the way," he added. "What do you propose doing about your own personal end of the case?"

"Meaning what?" demanded Maine, screwing round on him.

"Why, this murder business of yours—the one you've done fifteen years for."

"Well, what about it?" snapped Maine.

The detective shifted his feet and looked awkwardly at his man.

"Only that you've got us right down under your thumb," he said. "You can hold the Home Office up for anything you like to mention. All the Yard is talking about it this morning; they're cackling away like a lot of wet hens. And the legal departments are biting their fingernails over it—wondering what you are going to do about it."

"There's nothing to stop them wondering," said Maine grimly.

"You've got the very devil of a case against us; you know that, don't you?"

"Know it!" Maine wheeled on him ferociously. "Know it, you poor fool. I've known it for the last fifteen years and two months. Five thousand five hundred and thirty-eight days—*and nights*—it's the only thing I have known. I've lived with that knowledge stuffed up into my brain like a red-hot diamond. It has been the only reality that kept me alive, kept me going through the years of waiting

and hoping. Man, I've been living for these days, living for the day I shall have Jaan Vorst standing where I stood."

"I didn't exactly mean that end of it," said the detective. "I know you've got a grievance—and a darn big one, too. If most men I know had gone through what you've just had to put up with, they wouldn't be bearable within a hundred miles. They'd have gone loco—spent the rest of their lives stirring up hell's own broth with the authorities. But you haven't. And it isn't natural. Part of my job this morning was to sound you on your attitude to us in general. And, frankly, I'm finding you a bit of a puzzle. You're about as remote as a polar bear on an isolated iceberg.

"And that's why I'm asking you. You're taking it too quietly—too quietly by half—as though it was all in the run of the piece. You're still siding in with the cause of law and order, as though the rights of the individual were a proposition you'd never heard about. Anyone would think you were quite content to be out again and to let the dead past bury its dead. No go, Mr. Maine, you don't get away with it as easy as that."

Maine picked up his trousers and socks.

"What do you mean?" he jerked out.

"I mean that's a bad sign, anyway. There's something behind your quietness. You're not the type that lies down under a flogging like you've just had. You're different: different from the common herd of jail-hawks. You're educated. And it makes a difference. You've got the drop on the authorities, and you know it; but for the life of me I can't see what your game is."

"You will!" said Maine, and the two words slid out from between his teeth with something of the malignancy of a threat in them.

"Money?" The detective glanced down disinterestedly at his finger-nails.

A dry flicker of a grin shot through Maine's eyes. It was in and out again in a second.

"Money," he said quietly. "Oh, yes, Mr. Policeman, you can bet your sweet soul a few figures scribbled on a cheque will compensate me for the petty annoyance I've just experienced." He went right up close to the man from the Yard and took him gently by the buttonhole. "Look here," he said, "suppose you just forget that end of it altogether? It doesn't concern you or anyone else on it. That little business concerns me—and one other. Just tell your chief that you found yourself on a bit of bad hunting, but that you are sure it will all come out right in the end. Tell him that ever so gently. Tell him that Kellard Maine himself told you so. You can also whisper in his ear that Mr. Maine has not the slightest intention of making a fool of himself, that, indeed, he has every intention of abiding strictly by the laws of the game." Maine released the buttonhole from between his finger and thumb, smiled the old wintry smile into the detective's face and, without another word, turned and went in for his morning tub.

The detective fingered his chin and ruminated.

"Queer devil," he muttered after a while. It was his sole comment on the matter, and, in his own impeccable manner, it represented his sole but perfectly satisfactory conclusion.

FOR a couple of minutes there was the sound of splashing water in the bathroom. Then a shower-bath squirted, the cold, unmistakable swish of sound that is recognizable anywhere. Followed towellings and rubbings of a vigorous nature.

In a little while Maine came out, fresh, quick and eager, looking as though he had never known such a twenty-four-hour spell as he had lived through the previous day. He finished his dressing without so much as another look at the detective.

The detective had a car waiting, and in silence they sped round to Scotland Yard, that grim, forbidding-looking pile that squats at the top end of the Embankment and glowers across at the new magnificence of the County Hall, and every now and then squints up at the tower of Big Ben out of its right eye like the guardian bulldog it is.

Sir Everard Lewis was waiting for them. He was in his own holy of holies, sitting back in a revolving chair, his fingers drumming a worried tattoo on the top of his desk.

"Is this Mr. Maine?" he asked, and the detective nodded. He had stood up and nodded briefly as they entered, and now as brusquely resumed his seat again.

"Yes, sir," said the detective. "He knows exactly what you want, and he has read all the morning papers dealing with the matter."

Lewis looked up out of a quick intuitive eye.

"Shall we get right down to the bones, Mr. Maine?" he said.

"I'll be eternally obliged if you would," said Maine pointedly.

Sir Everard was a shortish, dapper little man with a military air of authority sticking out all over him. He had a neat little white moustache and an odd little trick of showing his teeth when he talked. Maine discovered subsequently that he exhibited a new mannerism to everyone he spoke to—and always a singularly noticeable one to strangers who looked as though they were sizing him up.

Lewis had graduated from the slickest school of detective science on earth—the anti-espionage corps; and one of his chief accomplishments was the ability to read a man off like a news paragraph. The Wilhelmstrasse alone knew the true neatness of his methods. He had sold Potsdam a persistent and continuous litter of pups from the moment he took office.

His world was not among the bag-snatchers and shop-window bashers; he was as far divorced from them as from area sneaks and the daily police-court toll of drunk-and-sorries.

Lewis was concerned with the higher realms of criminal artifice. International work was his *métier*. It was said of him that there was not a criminal of repute in all Europe, from warship-plan thief to big-scale drug runner, who was not known to him by sight and whose work he could not recognize within five minutes of coming into contact with it.

Maine was aware of a keen and searching stare that went over him with the biting thoroughness of a glass-cutter. Lewis hadn't missed a feature or a peculiarity. In that ten deliberate seconds Maine knew that he had been definitely analyzed, recorded, docketed and filed away for future reference. A mind photograph of him had been taken, and, no matter how far ahead it might be required, it would always be there—and it would never err.

Maine, for his part, gave one quick look at the little man, raised a faintly surprised eyebrow that such a man would be holding such a post, and sat down opposite.

Lewis seemed to be completely satisfied with his scrutiny, for, after a few seconds, he pushed over a big box of cigars and said, "Have a smoke, Mr. Maine."

Maine waved them aside.

"I've a few suggestions to make, Sir Everard," he said. "Vorst has already declared his war and you are now aware of the calibre of the guns he's using. I may tell you that, incidentally, these are only the preliminary rumblings, the advance guard of experiments. When he begins putting down his real barrages, London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, Bristol, and all the great industrial centres of Britain will be nothing but cities full of unstaffed, overcrowded hospitals."

"And your suggestions?" The query dropped like a polite icicle.

"First, that you concentrate every available man you can spare on the river between London Bridge and the widening of the estuary. Vorst's germ-farm lies somewhere along that stretch. Conduct a house-to-house search along both banks. Arm your men and tell them to shoot at the first sign of trouble. You'll get Vorst only over a barricade of dead bodies. The whole crowd of them are fanatics; death means less to them than a quart of bilge water. Let them take each factory, warehouse and wall and sound it yard by yard. But find it! Locate it!

"Let me know where it is—and *I'll* deal with Vorst's precious germs. There is only one man in England who can hold a candle to Vorst as a toxicologist. That man is Kellard Maine. Vorst knows enough about poisons to make me look silly at every point of the compass. But I know enough to pull his teeth once I get the privilege of an hour to myself in that great incubatory of his. Vorst is attacking at the source, and so must we."

"Yes, and the rest?"

"There are seven grain ships arriving at the ports within the next forty-eight hours. Put an embargo on the sale of their cargoes; use any pretext you like. Quarantine the whole shoot with suspected plague, if you like, or accuse their mascots of having rabies. Get samples of their wheat and send them to Hollis. Demand an immediate analysis. I think you will find that every bag of grain in the whole consignment of each ship is poisoned. Two hogbacks arrive on Saturday. Have them treated the same."

"And thirdly?"

"Call a conference of the press. Explain the whole thing to them from beginning to end, and suggest that Britain's safety is the measure of their own silence. They won't be unreasonable. They will appreciate the gravity of the situation as readily as you have—perhaps a little quicker. Establish a rigid censorship of all news in that connection. Vorst is aiming to get all his information as to the success of his various try-outs from the accounts published in the newspapers.

"The progress and increasing virulence of his various cultures will be neatly tabulated and concisely arranged for him. It's your only chance of severing his lines of communication. Blind him—put him in the dark. Don't let him get a single hint as to how his outbreaks are progressing. Just now he is dabbling about in the sparsely populated districts—making his first experiments with his cultures on the human body in districts where the arrival of medical attention is necessarily long delayed. In a week he will be decimating the population of every big city in the country. You'll gain your first big point if you fog him up with lack of news."

"And anything more?"

"Yes; fourth, and most important of all so far as I am concerned, find Miss Coralie Warden."

The chief's eyebrows gave a twitch.

"Miss who?" he asked and let his eyes roam all over the room.

"Miss Coralie Warden."

"Of the Opera House?"

"Yes."

LEWIS let his eyes come back gently to Maine. Their glance seemed to rest on him with the soft touch of a butterfly wing, yet Maine could almost feel them sizzling into him.

"Exactly where does that young lady enter into this affair?" he inquired, his voice full of little steel points.

Maine returned his stare, volt for volt.

"That," he said succinctly, "is a matter that neither concerns you, nor Scotland Yard, nor any other little government god, nor anyone else on earth, except me. And I'm not talking women today."

"You're not?"

"Not a line."

"Miss Warden was the girl who was living in that Park Lane house at the time when we raided it?"

"It looks to me," said Maine, polishing a fingernail, "as though the favourite for the three o'clock is very handsomely treated by the handicapper."

"And this girl has been actually living there with Jaan Vorst?"

"Furthermore, it looks like rain, I think. Well, that will put the Dartmoor gangs under cover."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Maine. That will be all for this morning."

"Been a beautiful day, hasn't it?" said Maine, getting up and strolling towards the door.

The chief watched his receding figure with smouldering eyes.

"Mulish brute!" he muttered half under his breath.

The detective nodded. "Deep as a Wellington boot, sir," he whispered. "Couldn't get a line out of him at the Grand Embassy. Just said what he wanted to say and then closed up as tight as the Bank of England on Boxing Day."

The chief, apparently, was not listening. He was no longer concerned with the detective's presence.

"Extraordinary!" he was whispering under his breath. "Absolutely extraordinary. And quite unique in all my experience."

The detective eyed him furtively. "Found a likely point of contact, sir?" he asked hopefully.

The chief seemed to pull himself back into the world that surrounded him.

"Contact—er—yes," he said. "More than that, Inspector. If that girl Warden was staying there on the dead straight ticket, we'll have Jaan Vorst under hatches before the sun sets tonight. Quick—rush after that man Maine. Don't let him go. I want another talk with him. He's right—right all along the line in what he says—and I want him again. Jump to it, and you'll get him before he is clear of the building."

The inspector was on his feet and away, grabbing his hat as he went out.

Sir Everard Lewis picked up his phone and sent a string of orders whizzing over the wire, some to his secretaries, some to junior police chiefs and some even to the switchboard operators.

"And get a couple of plainclothes men and a sergeant out to Hendry's," he finished up. "Don't do anything rash. Just tell them to hang around and look as though they weren't keeping their eyes open. I'll want reports from them every hour. There should be a pronounced movement of Asiatics out there before long. I want to know when it happens. Also the advent of a man named Kellard Maine. He will make trouble—and for the love of mud don't stop him! Help him, if he wants help—which he won't."

He picked up his hat and was striding off with the quick, purposeful steps of the soldier born.

Down in the entrance hall he overtook Maine and the detective.

The detective was holding a wholly one-sided argument with himself. The chief took Maine to one side.

"I'm sorry about that little affair just now," he said hurriedly. "I didn't quite get your drift. You've been working a jump ahead of me. You're right. There's no other way. Of course, you are right. Heard all the latest?"

"No," said Maine bluntly, turning round.

"Outbreak of typhus reported this morning from some farm settlements in the Midlands —Chiltern Hills hamlets. There are certain blood complications that baffle the doctors. Hollis has been working all night on those samples you got out of that underwater rendezvous. I'm expecting him along now. Clever old devil. Hope to Heaven he's ferreted out something. I'm putting on the news ban right away through the Health Ministry—I'll see the editors myself. They'll stand in—for a time, anyway."

"Typhus, eh?" said Maine speculatively. "H'm, that's bad! It's water-borne. That means he has started polluting the springs. You'll find all the infection in the Chilterns coming from one watercourse. Find it and send digging patrols to its source. You'll unearth great cylinders of germ cultures slowly

oozing out into the stream. Is that all now?"

"No. Thirty-four deaths notified up to this morning from Ledminster, the Wolds, and Exmoor."

"Phew!" said Maine.

"Getting bad, isn't it?"

"It'll be hell in a week—unless we can get Vorst."

The chief looked at him hard, his eyes glittering coldly under his dapper little brows. He held out his hand with a jerk. "Good luck, boy," he said fairly.

"Thanks," returned Maine. "I don't need luck."

They were approaching the great entrance arch that leads out to the Embankment. Suddenly Maine stopped dead. his hand out to the chief's shoulder.

A quiet, benign old figure was coming towards them, fumbling in his pocket for coppers for a vendor of matches hobbling along at his side. He took the matches and the vendor vanished towards the Tube entrance.

"Hollis!" said the chief.

"And the Black Triangle, too!" gasped Maine. "Good heavens—Hollis has got his. That match seller was Dassi!"

Lewis stopped dead, and his eyes flicked from Hollis to Maine and then back again to the fast disappearing figure of the Hindu.

In the same moment he raised an imperative finger to the police officer on duty at the entrance gate. The man hurried over.

"Quick—follow that man—that one just limping round at the end there. Don't let him out of your sight. Phone me immediately where he goes to earth." The officer was away at the run almost before the chief had finished speaking.

KELLARD MAINE, with his arm linked in the doctor's, was heading back to the pavement. Dr. Hollis, without saying a word, was looking half-indignant, half-bewildered.

True to his old-school breeding, he himself was the politest of old souls, and he deeply resented anything that smacked of the cavalier. And he was righteously annoyed: for Maine, without so much as a by-your-leave, had just snatched the matchbox from his hand as he was about to open it. As a gesture of friendliness it was inexcusable: Maine in his high-handed way had simply grabbed his, the doctor's, matches, and the old boy wanted to know what the hell's bells the big idea was. There was a cigar clenched between his teeth and, in his first fuddlement at such incontinent treatment, he had forgotten to take it out of his mouth.

"Excuse me, Mr. Maine," he barked, the cigar jerking up and down in his teeth, "pray release my arm. I wish to light my cigar. What—"

"Not with these matches, old friend," said Maine.

"Give me my matches, sir! And please explain your extraordinary conduct!"

"One of these days, Doctor, you'll realize that in dealing with Jaan Vorst you're not attending a sewing bee. Been up all night?"

"Yes, I have," snapped the doctor, with undiluted asperity.

"I guessed it. They caught you in a tired moment. Your brain isn't working quite so smoothly this morning. That match-seller was Dassi—a man I had a bit of a bother with in Vorst's house last night. Vorst has given you the Black Triangle. It's here, in this matchbox. Better come along inside the Yard and investigate it. I reckon you wouldn't have lived ten seconds if you'd opened that box. Jaan, you'll find, is devilish slick in little matters like this. Does it so naturally that he catches you on the hop. The Vorst gang know you've been called in: know you've been working on their case tonight. They wouldn't give you any spectacular threat of death to operate some hours ahead. They'd kill you where you stood. Come along in—you know Sir Everard, don't you?"

Hollis and the chief bowed stiffly to each other.

"Maine is right," said Lewis. "That matchbox will want a deal of careful handling. Vorst is too unnaturally clever for my liking. Too slick by half. In spite of being hounded out of his Park Lane place he hasn't stopped working five minutes." He lit a match and held it to Hollis's cigar.

Hollis puffed away contentedly and, only slightly mollified, followed them in. To his credit it should be said that the sudden dramatic revelation had left him unmoved. He was far too constitutional a member of the die-hard breed to allow the machinations of such unpleasant people as criminals to ruffle his serenity. Only a doubtful move in high politics could do that. He was one of the old blue bloods whose every thought was impersonally imperial.

But he was looking very weary. Fifteen hours at the test bench without a break had told its tale. The benign old fellow was no longer fitted for such slogging efforts of endurance. There was a stoop to his shoulders, and his feet had lost their old buyoancy of tread. His face looked utterly weary and there was a telltale droop in his eyelids.

Lewis noted it and mentally thanked his gods. Those signs meant that Ferrers Hollis had been anchored at his bench by something more than the mere inquisitiveness of the

analyst. He would never have continued pegging away all through the night if his tests were only giving him negative results. Hollis had got on the track. He had been making discoveries. Success had urged him on. The samples Maine had given him were not mare's nests. There was nothing of the false alarm about them. Hollis must have actually detected the poisons and isolated the cultures. Lewis was anxious to get his report before he called in the press or conferred with the Minister of Health.

Maine held the matchbox out in his hand and was speculatively weighing it on his open palm.

"A high explosive?" asked Sir Everard.

Maine shook his head. "Too light," he said. "And too small, I should think. You couldn't get enough stuff into a box this size to guarantee killing a man on the spot. Might damage him a bit, perhaps; blow his hands off, or blind him or, at a long shot, injure him so that he died. But I doubt if it would kill outright. It would all depend on what direction the explosive took. No; I think it is something neater and surer than that."

He turned the box over. The underside had been chemically treated. The heat of his hand was slowly bringing about a transformation of the colouring of the box.

"Look out, Maine—you'll be getting it yourself." The chief's words were sharp with apprehension. He had seen so much of Vorst's ingenuity within the last few hours that he was beginning to get suspicious of even mentioning his name. The man seemed able to exercise his uncanny powers in any direction at will.

Maine smiled frostily to himself. He had a deeper knowledge of the working of the poisoner's brain, a more comprehensive knowledge of his methods.

"No cause for alarm, Lewis," he said quietly. "I've been waiting for this and wondering when it would happen—and how. Very neat, I think. Vorst certainly has a nice eye for the dramatic. Ammoniated iron, I should think—with perhaps a squeeze of lemon in it to counteract the dye in the jacket."

The chief looked at him inquisitively.

"The warning?" he asked.

"Yes. This is the first instance in my knowledge that Vorst hasn't given full and fair warning of the hour of death. He has used all sorts of methods: and always the Black Triangle has been associated with the actual threat of impending death. He generally does it bluntly, trading on his knowledge of his victim's ignorance.

"Vallis and Hartigan went to their deaths all unsuspicious. So might I if I hadn't been mixed up with the beast before. So might Kyne. Hollis is different. Vorst knows that the doctor knows almost as much about his game as I do myself. So he takes the subtle way. Invisible ink: and he puts it underneath the box. See? You can see it all shaping up clearly now. The heat of the hand is bringing it out."

He held the box out. The under surface had almost completely changed. The deep blue of the stuck-on wrapper faded to pale cornflower, and in the middle of it the dreadful sign of the Black Triangle was slowly becoming more and more distinct. The thick markings became bolder and more substantial with every second that passed, like a photographic negative in the hypo bath.

They were well inside the great courtyard, away from inquisitive eyes, and they watched the metamorphosis intently. There was something else forming in the middle of the Triangle, but it was still very indistinct. Maine covered it with the palm of his hand for a few seconds, Hollis muttering thunderously under his breath at the audacity of the man who dared to threaten a public servant with death under the very shadow of Scotland Yard's entrance gates.

Maine took his hand off and the whole token stood out clear and distinct. The grim Black Triangle was there, bold and malignant, and printed neatly, in the centre of it, the grim word, *NOW!*

The chief's eyebrows came down over his eyes until they almost touched. For a moment he looked like a cyclone about to burst. Then he snapped, "Come up into my office," and wheeled round towards the wide steps.

"Tell the Electricity Department to send two pairs of insulated pliers up to my room at once," he said as they went through the swing doors.

HOLLIS suggested burning the box and then hunting about among the ashes for some clue to the lethal instrument inside. But Maine would not hear of it. "I want to know how it works," he said. "It's some devilish trick that Vorst may be using again on any one of us. And I want to see what it is."

"Let me do it," suggested Lewis when a messenger arrived with the pliers.

Maine waved him aside.

"If you've no objection, I'd rather it were me," he said. "Not from any heroic point of view, mind you; believe me, I wouldn't shed a single tear if you dropped dead over that table at this moment. But you're at the head of a fairish clever organization—and there's a certain young lady who needs finding. If I go west it wouldn't make much difference

either way. But you are too useful, my dear Sir Everard. Now that you've got the bit between your teeth, you'll carry on till you've seen it through. Give me those pliers."

He took the forceps and gripped the box with the left-hand pair. Then very gingerly he got a grip on the outer cover with the second pair and began to pull it open. The others gathered round, staring with tense eyes at the box. The chief, with his hand fumbling about behind him, found the electric wall switch and turned on a fierce blaze of light.

The lid of the box was slowly pulled back. A quarter of an inch—half an inch—and nothing happened. Maine gave a quick jerk on the pliers and the cover slid back another inch. At the same moment there was a sharp click, and the deadly little instrument stood revealed. In a moment the matchbox had become a miniature cheval-de frise. Six long but wonderfully fine needles stuck out of it all around, propelled by some powerful spring, hidden inside. They stood out rigid, at almost every angle, an inch and a half clear from the sides of the box. In the bright glare of the electric light they shone like the glittering eyes of some venomous insect, alive with the virulent power to kill.

"For Heaven's sake don't touch it—don't let those needles come near your skin!" gasped Hollis, pale in the hard radiance of the lamps.

"Haven't the slightest intention of doing anything so brave," replied Maine. "Here, Doc—you take it. Something for you to play with after you've had a good sleep."

"Sleep be damned, sir!" snorted Hollis. "What d'ye take me for—an old fogey with a torpid liver? D'ye think I can't do a little overtime without wanting half the hospital staff round me coddling me up? Bah! I'm as young as any of you! Give me that pernicious box, sir, and I'll show you whether Ferrers Hollis is played out after a few hours' extra push."

He took the box in a peppery huff and stalked away with it to the window. Maine and Lewis grinned at each other behind his back. "Good for the doctor!" muttered Sir Everard quietly.

Maine had taken the cover right off the box so that the whole mechanism stood open to view. It was very neat, put together with immaculate skill. Four different springs controlled the mechanism, one for each side of the box. When set, the springs, amazingly strong and thin, were pulled in to the centre of the box, where they were gripped by a four-pronged pinion, like a tiny balloon-grapnel.

In the lid of the box was a small projecting trip-pawl which, on being pushed against the grapnel, engaged it and revolved it half a turn so that the springs were released. All four snapped back simultaneously, forcing the needles out through the minute holes in the box. It was obvious at a single glance that no matter how that matchbox was held in the hand, at least one of the needles would be forced into the flesh; more probably two or three.

Hollis put the thing on the window-ledge and studied it through a microscope gripped in his right eye.

He inked a piece of paper and touched it against one of the needles, watching it for a couple of seconds through a fiercely screwed-up eye.

"Ah! The murderous swine!" he breathed.

"On the track first shot, old general?" inquired the chief over his shoulder.

Hollis grunted and took a couple of little blue phials from his pocket. He poured a drop from each on to a glass paperweight and called loudly for the chief's calabash. He unscrewed the mouthpiece and pushed a paper spill down the stem into the thick brown sediment under the bowl. When he withdrew it the paper was limp with a dilute of water and nicotine. While it was still moist he touched it against another needle. A slight bleaching was noticeable where the nicotine had touched the steel. He touched two of the others, and the result was the same.

He made two other tests—one with sulphur from a matchhead, and then tried a reagent on the needle he had already touched with the weak acid that is a component part of mineral ink.

"What's the verdict?" asked Lewis.

"Snake venom! I suspected it the moment I saw the needles," declared Hollis. "I can't say definitely from what precise specimen of snake the poison is derived, but it is of a particularly deadly nature—probably the black bushmaster or the copperhead. Both of them inject a venom that is a hundred per cent fatal. The particular horror of this compound, though, is that the poison was taken from the glands some time long after death. The venom has mortified and is therefore doubly virulent. The agony of such a death as these needles would bring would be so awful that the subject would probably die a raving lunatic."

"Thank you," said Lewis quietly. "That box will make a sweet addition to the C.I.D. museum. Better have those needles cleaned, first, though." He lit a cigar and looked hopefully at the doctor. "Well?" he inquired.

Ferrers Hollis got back to his lecture manner, slightly scientific, but highly pontifical.

"I—ah—subjected each of the samples submitted to me to a long series of tests," he announced. "I may say at once that the sum total of results goes to substantiate in every detail the allegations already made by Kellard Maine against the man Jaan Vorst. What might have been a very long and difficult undertaking was considerably simplified by the mass of knowledge and direct evidence already given me by Maine himself.

"In every case a distinct microbe has been isolated and identified, and in each case the microbe has been proved to be virulent—a source of gravely dangerous contamination. The remarkable feature about it is that, though the particular culture is distinct and recognisable on the microscope slides and photograph plates, the germ itself is a separate and unique culture. What has happened is that two entirely distinct cultures have been successfully crossed. This in itself is an amazing scientific accomplishment. It simply means that the one microbe introduces two entirely different diseases in a patient.

"The hellish ingenuity of it is emphasised by the fact that the two diseases, in one individual, are incurable. The two treatments clash. A course of treatment that is highly essential in one disease becomes fatal to the other—and vice versa. In curing the one you simply increase the other. It is the most astonishing thing I've every heard of. It probably accounts for the unheard-of thing that occurred in the case of the late Mr. Justice Vallis; his blood temperature, if you remember, continued to rise for some hours after death had supervened—a unique occurrence in medical history.

"This cross-breeding of the various cultures has resulted in a remarkable increase in the vitality of the bacteria obtained. They have attained a hardihood that is genuinely astonishing—almost equal to that of the bacillus of foot-and-mouth disease, one of the most obstinate known to medical science. I have isolated five distinct germ cultures and submitted them all to the two extreme tests—freezing and boiling. In every instance they survived and were, apparently, unharmed by the extremes of temperature.

"The highest temperature raisable in my laboratory—using superheated steam for the purpose—did not appear to affect them. They even survived in a vacuum, the temperature of which was reduced to eighty-three degrees below zero; that is, one hundred and fifteen degrees below freezing point."

Sir Everard Lewis looked across anxiously at Maine.

"Does that mean that no doctor in the land will be able to cope with these present outbreaks?" he asked, and there was a noticeable quiver in his voice.

"It means," said Hollis deliberately, "that there is no doctor in the world who could nullify these horrible toxins that Vorst has propagated."

Maine sprang to his feet.

"That be damned for a tale," he blurted. "Lewis—find me that germ-farm of his and I'll show you whether there's a doctor on earth who can settle Vorst's hash. Find me that factory; get the river men out till they've turned the whole river upside down and inside out. Find it for me—point it out—and I'll show you one! I'll give you an antidote that will make Vorst think the whole cosmic system has reared up on end and used him for a springboard."

The police chief looked at him standing there, eager, earnest, assured; with the desire for battle spilling out all over him.

"You will, will you?" he breathed.

"Find me that place of his and I'll show you!" The answer flared back with a fierceness that made Dr. Hollis jump.

Lewis pursed his lips. "You'll get your chance, my son, within forty-eight hours," he said quietly. "Every Water Rat in London is afloat, scouring the river from end to end. You'll get your chance, all right." He paused for a moment, and then, with a caustic look at the doorway, he added, "Meanwhile, the address you want is Hendry's Temperance Hotel, Ewell. Good morning."

CHAPTER VII

INTO THE SPY NET

EVENTS after that began to move up swiftly to a culmination. Both Maine and the skilled sleuths of the Yard felt the inexorable approach of a climax. Vorst's hand had been forced. The swift play and counterplay of recent events had conspired to set a pace too hot for any one man to hold. Organising genius though the Eurasian might be, it was manifestly impossible for him to be in several places at once. For the most part the leader's eyes had been blind for the last twenty-four hours. Only the quick, interlocked passage of occurrences in the capital were known to him. The morning papers told him that his right-hand men in the provinces were working to schedule—unaware of the trend of events in London.

Deep in his heart Vorst knew that in starting his campaign when he did, he had committed his only blunder. But it was a grave one; a serious miscalculation of tactics. The

evidence contained in the morning journals had given Scotland Yard just that little extra assurance that was necessary to convince them that Kellard Maine was not suffering from delusions.

That evidence, coming when it did—right on top of all the other evidence—Scotland Yard had no other course to take. So far as Sir Everard Lewis could see, it was only a question now as to whether Vorst could get his terrible poisons scattered wide enough to do any serious national injury before the wide-flung police organisation laid him by the heels.

Lewis, man of swift action always, got all his lines out at once. The river was being patrolled by eagle eyes day and night—police craft plied the downstream reaches of the waterway incessantly; slow-crawling motor-boats kept up a ceaseless vigilance on both sides of the water; innocent-looking tramps, skiffs and dingheys maintained a continual search of the river; and along the landward side of the wharves, squads of innocent-looking out-o'-works hunted and prowled through the lines of buildings looking for the one that had no entrance.

The lives of the ordinary merchant seamen on the tideway became a burden to them. Harmless-looking cargo boats, harnessed to the wharves, were ordered to sheer out into midstream, so that the underpiles of the great jetties might be searched. Ship searchers boarded them continually. A patrol would loom out of the dark walls of the night, clamber silently aboard, present their papers and proceed to turn the whole craft upside down from forefoot to sternpost.

Lewis was leaving nothing to chance. Clues might lurk aboard the most innocent-looking hooker on the whole waterway. And Lewis was out for them. Sometimes the entire crews were ordered ashore, so that the searchers might do their work without unwanted advice or hindrance from surly skippers.

And Lewis was as artful as he was keen. Less than an hour after a ship had got all nicely settled down again after the violent upset, the Water Rats would swarm aboard again, silent as shadows, and do it all over again. Even a crafty captain might be caught napping with such methods, and Lewis knew that *somebody* must be responsible for Vorst's water-borne transport.

Troops were sent out to all the affected areas. Soldiers are ready gossipers, and to silence their inquisitive speculations they were sent out in full drill order. Also the whole reason for their despatch was explained to them by their various C.O.'s. It appeared that stories had been long current of highly dangerous bombs, poison bombs, dropped by raiding enemy aircraft during the war, and that they were supposed to have fallen in the vicinities concerned. Hence the local epidemics. The soldiers' job was to dig for the projectiles, which had naturally buried themselves in the earth to some extent when they fell.

For what was probably the first time in history, a conference of great newspaper chiefs was called by Scotland Yard. Sir Everard went directly to the fountainheads; nobody was left unthought of. The great news agencies were represented, and the principal provincial papers were also desired to attend. The lesser papers did not matter, since they rely for their general services on the giant news-gathering organizations of the London Press.

Sir Everard approached them delicately. It was not an easy matter, for great press magnates are not of the breed to submit tamely to the dictates of the civil authorities. He hinted in veiled terms of a grave national menace that had suddenly arisen, all unexpected, but none the less fraught with calamity for all that. He discreetly inferred that only the candid and self-sacrificing co-operation of the gentlemen concerned could hope to avert the most awful disaster in the Empire's history.

THE request was so unique, so unheard of, that it had immediate effect. Lewis stayed in his own office, knowing what was coming. His phone bell began to squeal less than an hour after his first urgent messenger had gone forth.

"What's this, Lewis?" came a voice he knew from the other end. "Someone been pulling my leg? I've a letter here—came by hand—bears your signature and letterhead. What's it all about? A spoof?"

It was Cartner, of the *Echo*, a paper that specialised in splashing sensational crime stuff.

"Spoof? My God, no! I want you round here, Cartner, honestly. I daren't tell you even a rough-out over the phone."

"Bad as that, eh?"

"Probably a lot worse. There's something you can do even before you come round. May give you a hint as to what it's all about."

"Well?"

"You know that poison story—a three-act mystery that came out in all the—"

"Sure—we're splashing it this afternoon. Extraordinary thing—another outbreak reported this afternoon from—"

"Well, shut down on it. Cut it out. Don't let a word of it get into print today!"

"What the hell! Say, Lewis—"

"Can't help it, old son. It's taking the bread out of your mouth, I know. But I assure you, in all sincerity, if you don't you won't have any bread to put in your mouth at all in a week. It isn't the usual custom of Scotland Yard to call conference of the press, is it?"

"Er—no."

"Well, that's all the egg in the shell. Were you making a very big feature of the story today?"

"Front page splash over two columns; bannerline across all seven," said Cartner savagely.

"Well, I'll give you a good one to take its place. We've collared that Purley murderer. Got him an hour ago in a cave down at Cheddar. Fine story for you. Half the proceeds of the biggest jewel robberies in ten years were found stored up in the cave. A regular Aladdin's dump. Hasn't been made public yet. Send your crime man round to see my secretary. He will give you the whole story. Apparently the man has been living in the cave for years. He had enough tinned food there to last him through a siege. Rather a remarkable stalactite cave, too—hitherto undiscovered—spring water flowing through the back of it. I'll give you a permit to take pictures, if you want. Coming round?"

"You bet!"

"Conference at four-thirty. I'm arranging for the northern papers to come down by airplane."

Lewis spent the next two hours repeating similar conversations. The more sedate of the old-established organs made no bones about it. They simply bowed to the requirements of what was obviously a very serious national urgency, cut the story right out without hankering for anything to replace it, and sent their representative along.

The evening papers came out with a fine and varied assortment of news—Lewis gave each of them an exclusive splash to take the place of the big story—but not a single mention of the unusual record of mysterious poisonings that had piqued public curiosity earlier in the day. Public memory is short-lived. By next morning the affair was as good as forgotten. The only thing that had definitely happened was that the special correspondents were kept out. Their various chiefs wrote, in their own hands, long letters explaining that, though all the information regarding the outbreaks was urgently required in the offices, they need not expect to see their despatches appear in print. Also they were ordered to address all their communications to the Editor P.P. Working in close touch with both Scotland Yard and the Health Ministry, these communiques were sent straight to Sir Everard Lewis.

Hollis, back in his laboratory, took a good look at his eyes in the glass, shrugged his shoulders at the tale they told and jabbed a wicked-looking needle into his forearm. Half an hour later, with clear brain and steady nerves, he was at work on the post-mortem of Kyne.

Late that night he made his second report to Sir Everard Lewis. And still later that night one of the down-river stations came through the wire.

"That the chief? We've got a Chinese here with a withered finger," said the station.

Lewis looked up long enough from the telephone to hold up a detaining hand at Brinsley, who was just going out.

"Don't go yet, Brinsley," he jerked out. "Big stuff just coming through from down-river. I'll want you."

He turned back to the phone.

"Sure you've got the right one?" he demanded. "Little finger of the left hand?"

"That's right, Chief. That's the fellow we've got," answered the voice cheerfully.

"Know his name?" Lewis signalled to Brinsley to listen in on another phone.

"No, sir, nor anything else about him except that he was acting in a very suspicious manner. He won't open his mouth. Just stands and glares at us and pretends he doesn't know English. But he knows all right. He was jabbering English—and yards of it—to his mate in the boat when we spotted him."

LEWIS'S face had suddenly taken on a peculiarly wooden expression. It was as though fifty per cent of the live, vital character had drained out of it, leaving just the expressionless mask of the human features behind it, a stone thing which worked with something of the set mechanicalness of an automaton. An oddity of the sudden change was that the timbre of his voice did not alter by so much as a quiver. A movie director would have said in a moment that the man was acting—with his voice.

"Oh, so he was in a boat, was he?" said Lewis.

"Yes, sir, just a little way below Millwall—it's Millwall station speaking, sir."

"Well?"

"One of our boats saw him, slipping out from between some big wharves on the Surrey side. They hailed him, but the Chinese suddenly cranked up a motor and tried to get clear. He even jerked out a pair of oars to give him an extra couple of knots."

Three heads jerked in a single convulsive movement toward the floor....

"Did he answer your challenge in any way?"

"Not a word, sir. Just took to his heels and bolted. The patrol sounded the emergency call. And another boat cut across and headed him off."

"And you got him like that, eh?"

"Not by a long chalk. As soon as he saw the game was up and the pair of us were closing in on him, he took a flying header over the side!"

"Did he, by heaven!"

"He did, sir. Waited till we were within five yards of him, with engines going astern, and then shot in over the side like an eel. He'd have got away, too, if we hadn't spotted his game. The senior boat gave the order to circle. He was trying to swim clear, travelling like a fish under water. Fifty-five yards he went before he broke surface. Another ten yards he would have been under the counter of an old Scandinavian cargo-walloper—and we should never have seen him."

"That all?"

"Except that he fought like a raving maniac when we tried to get him into the boat. And he made two separate attempts to dive over again before we made the landing stage. All told, it seemed suspicious enough for me to detain him."

"Looks like a fairly true bill, officer. What do you propose? Can you bring him along here tonight?"

"Well, sir, to be honest, I don't think it's wise. There's nobody here we can spare; every man jack is out in the boats and—and candidly I don't like the look of it, sir. The whole business is pretty big, and I've an idea it's known in Chinatown already that we've got him."

"Expecting trouble?"

"If we tried to take him along, sir, yes. For all we know there may be hundreds connected with this job. They wouldn't try to recapture him. They're not such fools—nor so concerned about odd units of the gang. They'd get *him*. Make a rush at us and fill him up with knives before we knew what was happening. They wouldn't give him a chance of breaking down under cross-examination. There's some nasty neighbourhoods between here and the Yard."

"Admitted. Could you bring him up to Whitehall Stairs by boat?"

"Equally risky, sir. Accidents happen as easily at night on the water as in the slimy dives round—"

"Right. I'll come down and see him myself. Don't let anyone else enter or leave the building till I get there."

"You're not coming down alone, sir?"

"Sure I am. Got the other man—the man in the boat?"

"Yes. But he seems to be an ordinary ferryman."

"I'll be there in an hour."

Lewis put his instrument down. His eyes were glittering like a snake's, but his face had lost nothing of its putty-like woodenness.

"What do you make of that?" he queried.

"Looks good, sir," grunted Brinsley. Then he caught sight of his chief's face and, all in a moment, his thoughts began to hop back at lightning pace.

"Quite good," said the chief dryly. "Only it happens to be a Chinese with a withered finger on his *right* hand that we are after. Also, there is no emergency call sign from one patrol boat to another. Over and above which there is no river police station at Millwall. It was amalgated with Wapping exactly ten days ago."

"Strewth!" said Brinsley, and mopped his forehead.

"Exactly," assented the chief.

"Looks as though they were out for your blood, Chief."

"Something like that. I presume the idea is that I get within ten yards of where the Millwall station used to be—and I get mine!"

Brinsley rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Sounds like a chance, doesn't it?" he muttered.

The chief nodded, once: "Neat," he admitted, "but it doesn't work. Wherever *they* are, we just walk along and introduce ourselves. It's the tail end of a trail, anyway, and I'm taking all the gods send me this trip."

"How many men will you want, Chief?" Brinsley asked.

"Thirty. And all plainclothes! Get 'em as near my height as possible. Rush 'em round to the wardrobe and see if you can't rig them all up in my style. Silk toppers and long frock coats—and for mercy's sake give 'em all rubber heels. The van can circle round the old buiding—say, a half-mile radius—dropping one here and there. Then let them converge at a specified minute on the building itself. There ought to be quite a happy half hour for the boys. Truncheons and automatics."

The chief broke off. The vicious glitter had gone from his eyes; a sly twinkle had taken its place. Even the impassive Brinsley was trying to conceal a grin. The humour of it had got them both, but in a different way. Sir Everard Lewis was envisioning the embarrassed disconcertion of the thugs at the other end when thirty separate and distinct Sir Everard Lewises began to stroll towards them down Station Street. Brinsley was try-

ing to reconcile his imagination to a sartorial paradox—thirty rather ponderous-footed gentlemen of his acquaintance under thirty chimney-stack hats.

"And I shall be there," appended Sir Everard. "But not in a silk hat."

BRINSLEY gathered up some papers and, when almost out of the door, turned back to the chief with a sudden recollection.

"Are you sending for Maine?" he asked.

Lewis lit his pipe and surveyed his right-hand man blandly.

"Maine. Why?" he queried.

"Well—he might be useful. Seems to know more about it than any of us. He might be worth his weight in gold down at Millwall tonight."

If Sir Everard ever winked at an underling in his life he might almost be said to have winked then. A lightning flicker of his right eyelid, and a dourly amused twist at one corner of his mouth.

"Kellard Maine is already being worth his weight in gold—elsewhere," he said. A quick ear might have detected just the subtlest nuance of grimness in the way he said that.

There was silence for a little while, and then Lewis, with a quick upward glance of his eyes, said:

"Know anything about Hendry's Temperance Hotel—out at Ewell?"

Brinsley thought for a moment. It didn't do to give unconsidered answers to the chief. Neither did it do to forget things, and even an encyclopaedic memory cannot be guaranteed to function swiftly and accurately late at night after a hard grind.

"No—I can't say that I do," he said.

"Used to be Henri's—of Soho?" said the chief calmly.

Brinsley jumped.

"What? The Mediterranean scum-pot in Little Compton Street?"

"Just that one. When we got onto the track of that one, we found a real humdinger. Sort of general clearing house for all the espionage work going on between here and the Indian Ocean. A regular hotbed of all the Asiatic tribes you can think of, from Persia to Korea—and secret information being traded over the counter like so much cake. They had a standing tariff with a hard and fast scale of values between nation and nation. The place was crawling alive with gentry we had been trying to get our hands on for years.

"Yes, I remember the place, but—"

"You don't link up? Well, it was like this. The license holder, Henri himself, was never implicated in any of the captures we made at his little restaurant. He is a naïve sort of a fool, really. Prided himself on his cuteness in keeping clear of the shadow of suspicion. Gosh, we wouldn't have taken him for a fortune. He was the jam pot, and all the lesser wasps buzzed round him. Now do you get me? He was just a born spy organiser, and wherever you found Henri, there you would find the men you were looking for. Every now and then we held a little jamboree on our own account, and Henri would find half his clientèle wiped up. Just after the war he removed himself decorously to that little place out at Ewell. Odd for a master spy handler to banish himself out into that wilderness like that, wasn't it?"

"You mean—Vorst?"

"Why not? This organisation has been building for years. I believe all the preliminary work of laying out the land and timing the program was all done from there. It has been reported to me that Asiatics have been seen in that locality with some frequency of late. It is one of my cardinal guides always to accept the obvious and the apparent—until other evidence arrives. You'd be amazed how much you save in the long run, for the average criminal is not very subtle."

"You—don't think Vorst himself is there, Chief?"

"Not now. But it's a hundred to one that Miss Coralie Warden is to be located there. Just a moment—I'll give it a run."

He picked up his telephone and called up the editor of one of the great news distributing services.

"Hello, that the Topical and General?" he asked. "Scotland Yard speaking here—confidentially. Can you tell me if you have had any news through with reference to Miss Coralie Warden, the famous singer?"

"Just a moment, sir, I'll put an inquiry on." There was silence for a moment, and then the answer came.

"As a matter of fact, sir, we have. She has cancelled all her engagements for the next few days."

"Was any excuse given?"

"Just the usual, sir—indisposition. We understand she will not be singing again for some days at least."

"Where did that news originate? From the offices of her concert agents?"

"Half a minute; I'll get the flimsy." Again there was a moment's pause, and then the editor came on again. "No," he said. "It's from a private address, postmarked Ewell."

"Thank you," said Lewis, and looked across at the inspector.

"Now do you see what I mean?" he asked.

Brinsley nodded again, the same ponder-

ous wag of his head that denoted complete assimilation of an inference implied.

"Yes, I see," he said gently. "And Mr. Maine knows this Ewell address?"

"He is probably already there," said Lewis.

"In which case," decided Brinsley, "there will be flamin' hell to pay out at Hendry's Temperance."

"I've sent a couple of good men out there. Flying Squad men in one of the side-cars. They have orders to hang around there and report to me anything that happens—or looks as though it might happen. Maine will never report. He's as single track as a mono railway. And he may be running his head into a nosebag before very long. We can't afford to lose him."

"Looks like being a busy night again, sir," grunted Brinsley.

"Yes, but so far, I think, so good," said the chief.

KELLARD MAINE walked up the short driveway to Hendry's Temperance and Commercial Hotel, Ewell, with something of the feelings of a lone prospector stirring in his heart. Lewis's hint had been so broad that there was only one face to it. Except for the fact that the chief of police seemed to have good grounds for believing that a definite trace of Coralie Warden would be found within those four walls, he was existing in an abysmal darkness. He came as the pioneer wanderer comes, doggedly hopeful, but utterly ignorant of the ground.

He dumped his attaché case in the porch, rang the bell and waited.

Hendry's was not a pretentious-looking residence. It had that depressing air of shabby gentility, that atmosphere of camphor balls and quiet resignation that spoke unmistakably of better days long since gone by. Henri was no longer the bon-vivant of the Soho days with a bright cluster of shrewd-eyed, moneyed adventurers around him. The air of failure hung over it like a blight.

But, for what it was, it had its good points. It's first qualification was that it was set well back from the road; a not too tidy little island in the middle of a very small lake of trees. Also it was isolated. There was no building within a quarter of a mile of it. Whatever went on there would only be observable to those actually in it. Also the various approaches to it were under observation all the way up from the road. And it was on the telephone.

But the house itself was nondescript. A rambling, red-brick house, with a wide strip of kitchen garden at its back, and a decrepit-looking shrubbery in front. Maine took a quick glance over the front of the place to get its general architecture in mind. There were three stories, the top, a mere series of attics, being obviously the staff rooms. There was a window that opened directly above the stuck-on roof of the pretentious-looking porch, rain-water pipes at the ends—and that was about all. Altogether, a drab, uninteresting-looking heap of bricks and mortar, unrelieved by any attempt to hide the ugliness of its lines.

A peek-faced, slatternly little maid answered the door.

"Have you any accommodation vacant?" asked Maine.

"You can have nine-tenths of the bloomin' house if you want it," replied the maid indelicately.

"Empty?"

The maid wiped her hands on a coarse piece o' sacking that served for an apron. "Empty!" she snorted. "We've never been full here yet—'cept on Derby day; and then you can't move. 'Stayin' for the night?"

"Probably for a day or two. Will you take me through to the office?"

In a couple of minutes Maine was explaining his requirements to Henri himself, a particularly unwholesome-looking, yellow-skinned man who traveled under the graceful but totally unwarranted French pseudonym. There was a leer in his voice and in his eyes, and Maine thought he detected on his features the waxy lifelessness of the absinthe addict.

Henri bowed, and his face creased into a Welcome Stranger smile.

"You want rooms?" he said.

"One, a back one if you have it. The sun comes in at the back in the mornings, and I may want to print a few photographic studies."

"Then you are staying?"

"For a little while, yes."

"Motoring?"

"No—just walking—and taking a few photographs as I go."

"Room twenty-four," said Henry. "I hope you'll like it."

Maine looked at him swiftly, out of the corner of his eyes. There was something veiled, something suggestive about the way the Easterner had said that. "I'm not taking my meals here," he said.

And Henri bowed again. "Lizzie," he murmured, "take the gentleman's luggage upstairs."

Maine's hand was in ahead of hers by a couple of inches. "I'll carry this myself, if you don't mind," he said, picking up his grip. "When I need a little five-footer to carry luggage for me, I'll ring."

The little slattern looked at him brazenly.

"Trying to get fresh?" she demanded, and Maine grinned to himself. A poor little skivvy-of-all-work, with rat-tail hair and boots all broken out round the soles, in a gunny-sack apron and coarse black stockings, sticking up for her own little frigid dignity. The little snub nose looked more pinched and peeked than ever, but the worked-out colorless little eyes had the flash of the vixen in them. The odd little misfit, predestined from the day of her birth to be called "Lizzie!" and to clean other people's boots, standing up regally, gallantly, for the royal rights of womanhood.

"Fresh? Oh, dear, no," he said. "But that bag is heavy, and, like the luggage racks on the railway, you're built for light articles only, my dear."

The pathetic little soul did not laugh. She just kept her face upturned to him and studied him. This was a new proposition in her life—a marvelously new one. A man—and one who had a little consideration for a seventeen-year-old throw-out from the factory of life. Very unusual.

Maine was aware of that unblushing scrutiny all the way to his room.

"Haven't signed the register yet!" she informed him flatly, when they got to the landing.

"I'll do so when I come down," murmured Maine.

"What's your name?"

"Jones."

"Funny how many people who stay in hotels are named Jones," she said. Maine could almost feel the shrewish unbelief in the acid little voice.

She did not say another word. She just plodded along at his side till they got into Room 24. Then with a sudden kick of her leg she slammed the door to and wheeled on him in a blaze of earnestness that lit up her whole face and gave a hectic spot of colour to the pallid white cheeks.

"'Ere! Are you looking for someone?" she whispered in a breathy hiss.

Maine, in that speeding moment, sized her up.

"Yes—very urgently," he said quietly, and stared down at her.

"A gal? A very pretty gal?"

"Yes; quickly."

"I'll come and see you tonight. For God's sake leave your door open. I daren't stop now. The Chinks would murder me if they knew I was in here with you more than a minute. Tonight—twelve o'clock." The girl was almost gasping with fright, but without another single look at Maine she tiptoed to the door, listened intently for a moment and then, with her finger to her lips, she slipped out onto the landing.

MAINE stared at the suddenly shut door. Exactly ten seconds had elapsed during that electrifying little interlude. It had all happened in the normal time occupied in the opening and shutting of a door. Just a tiny swish of red-hot seconds, fallen accidentally into his life—and yet.

He tried to snap his thoughts off at that. But a totally unswallowable lump was sticking in the back of his throat, a lump that hurt and seemed to be getting bigger every minute. He gulped at it hopelessly and stared at the door.

The man who had spent so long battering at the quarry face that something of the very fibre and fabric of the granite had entered into his soul, suddenly found the door blurring on his vision.

Throughout his efforts to expose the dreadful horror that hung, typhoon-like, over the Empire's existence, he had had to hammer his way to a hearing through other people's scoffs and unbeliefs. Such friends as he now possessed, such allies as were now ranged on his side, had had to be won over by the sheer force of demonstrated proof. Cold facts alone had made them credulous. It had required the agonised deaths of friends of theirs before he could make them friends of his.

And yet there, unasked, unexpected, in the figure of an undernourished, undersized little spitfire of a drudge, he had found a friend who took him on sight at his own face value—a man who acted decently towards the sex that bore him, pitiful little specimen though the model might be. Through the blur of the painted wood he could almost see the weazened, cattish little face, hungry, worked to the bone, yet still, in some savage, incomprehensible way, vibrant with all the deadly ability to fight back that has been the birthright and heritage of woman since first she came to be mate of man.

"Lizzie, you little hundred per center, you'll never clean another pair of boots again as long as you live," he muttered, and swallowed foolishly at the unforgiving lump. Which only went to show how wide of the mark his assessment of the little slavey's character was. For Lizzie was of the type who would clean her own boots though she were made queen of England, and who, if she took a notion to clean someone else's would only be prevented from doing so by a straitjacket or sudden death.

He pushed his hands into his pockets and paced quietly up and down the room. He

sized up the situation through a line of reasoning that was quick, sure and accurate. Coralie was still alive. She was in danger. That was obvious from the little slavey's desperate concern. But her position was not immediately critical; for on Lizzie's own showing her rescue could wait until nightfall. Therefore he decided his best course of action was to play 'possum with Henri in order to make the way as easy as possible for Lizzie.

He hung about in his room for half an hour and made a show of unpacking his gear. Such small items of linen and haberdashery as he had brought with him, he took out and laid neatly in their several drawers. A suit of pajamas he tossed on the bed. Hairbrushes and combs were laid out on the dressing table, and his shaving bag left dangling by the wash basin.

His first job would be a quick walk to the chemist's shop in the village. He had specially stipulated a back room when choosing his apartment, on the pretext of printing photographs. Henri, if his suspicions really were aroused, would certainly take the first opportunity of discovering for himself whether his visitor actually did possess photographic requisites or not. And, since he didn't, it was expedient to get some.

He locked his bag and slipped quietly out of the room.

Halfway along the landing a linen-cupboard door opened the barest crack and a thin, breathy little voice hissed:

"Mister!"

Maine stopped in his tracks and went down on one knee to tie an imaginary bootlace.

"Well—what it it?" he whispered.

"The boss—he's rumbled you."

"You're sure?"

"Soon as you went upstairs he went and got hold of the Chinese. When I got down I heard 'em all talking. Hell of a crowd of devils they are. You'll get a knife into you if you don't watch out."

"Who do they think I am, missy?"

"A 'tec, ain't you?"

"Do they know my name?"

"I dunno. All I know is they was talkin' about you; and they was talkin' vicious. And when that crowd starts talkin' vicious there's always trouble for someone."

"How many Chinese are there?"

"About a dozen. But you can't tell; fresh ones keep comin' and goin'. A week ago the place was crawling alive with them. And none of 'em ain't up to no good."

"Do they board here?"

"No. Dunno where they live. But they come here chin-waggin' with the boss."

"Where's that girl I'm looking for?"

"Next room under you. You're above her."

The quick thought flashed through Maine's mind that if Henri had recognised him in the hall he must be playing a devilish deep game to have put him in the room above the girl. There was something more in that move than appeared on the face of it.

"What is her number?" breathed Maine, standing up.

"Fourteen. But you can't get near her from the landing. That part of the 'otel is shut off from the rest of the house . . . bricked up—a sort of private 'ouse for the boss."

"When did she arrive?"

"'Smornin'. In a motor car. Very ill she was. Or so they says she was. But I know. I've seen 'em like that before. But you go steady, mister. An' watch your ribs. That's where they'll get you. Fair dabsters at it, they are. And—another thing."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Don't let 'em get you into the bar!"

"The bar?" repeated Maine in a surprised whisper. "But this is a temperance hotel, surely?"

"Got a bar, just the same. But only for residents. Take my tip and don't go near it. I'll tell you more about it tonight. But as sure as you let 'em get you into that room you're a dead 'un."

MAINE straightened up his tie and continued his quiet walk downstairs. He had that unpleasant conviction at the back of his consciousness that he was being watched. He could almost feel unseen eyes following his movements and taking shrewd note of all he did. He experienced something of the feeling of a fly buzzing round a spider-web, with the spider looking on from some hidden vantage point, knowing full well that his victim would land up sooner or later in the net.

Down in the office he found Henri waiting for him. The spy master was his own obsequious self, smiling, ingratiating, looking as though he were genuinely pleased to see his new arrival.

"Your room satisfactory, sir?" he asked gently.

"Good enough," answered Maine, not troubling to disguise his feelings overmuch. "But a bit too high for my liking. Is the room below mine available?"

"Unfortunately—ah—no. That one has been booked up for some time now. Number fourteen similar room to yours, sir, immediately below it, but, as I say, unfortunately—ah—occupied."

"Oh—mine will do," said Maine airily. "The sun's just right for what I want. And the bed appears to be sleepable. That's all I ask."

"And would you mind signing the visitors' book, sir; that little form there needs filling in, too."

Maine felt for his fountain pen. The situation was rushing up, breakneck, to a climax. Maine could feel it in the air, dormant but prickingly present. This fellow Henri needed watching. He was subtle, clever—and yet as wide open as the ocean. He was simply leading Maine along; mocking him. His was no suave excuse, apologising for the occupation of room fourteen. He was telling him that the girl was there, quietly bragging about it and taking humorous enjoyment from the fact that he had put his police guest immediately above her.

Maine's brain was travelling along the double track. He found himself unscrewing the cap of his pen and reviewing the odds on his chances of getting out of Hendry's Temperance Hotel before nightfall. Roughly, he put it, about a thousand to one against. Henri would not be fool enough to stand for that. Getting out meant not merely the subterfuge of buying a camera and a dozen plates, but telephoning Scotland Yard.

Henri was looking at him with half a smile in his eyes. He seemed to be following Maine's mental processes—challenging him to set the ball rolling. It was almost as though the glitter behind his eyes said, "Well—if you think you're in on a good thing—start something! Go ahead; have the courage of your convictions and let her rip. Make an excuse to go out. Try and phone for your friends to come along. Risk it!"

He glanced furtively up and down the hall. Little knots of olive-skinned men seemed to have appeared mysteriously from the atmosphere itself. There were four at the far end by the bottom of the stairs, six by the front entrance, and a couple of others leaning nonchalantly against the card room door talking in low tones to each other. The whole crowd of them were, apparently, quite oblivious of Maine's presence there.

"Seem to have filled up in a hurry!" said Maine.

"We frequently do. It is one of the advantages of the locality."

"I'll bet my sweet life it is. Run a special chop suey menu for that heap of dirt?"

He looked at the proprietor hard in the eyes and, without a tremor, tapped a spot of ink from his pen and scrawled his bold signature across the register—"Kellard Maine."

Having written it, he stared at the proprietor again, and his own unspoken challenge was: "Well—take it out on that! Beat it—and I'll give you another!"

Henri glanced down. He had noticed the sudden wintry glint in Maine's steely blue eyes. He started almost imperceptibly when he read the name written there. But in the same moment he mastered his shock.

"Maine? Maine?" he mused. "Not a common name. I don't think I know it."

"You will," said Maine. "It's a name that appears to have a special propensity for getting what it wants."

"I hope we shall come to know each other well during your stay here." Henri, in that utterance, was his own immaculate self again. In his own mind he was elevating Maine to the pinnacles of courage. He realised that during that swift parry and thrust Maine had come off a couple of points to the good. He had said all he had to say without hedging. His sentences had come out, cold and hard—and dogged. And yet he had not lost an atom of poise. His serenity was unruffled.

"You're not a teetotaler?" The question dropped with infinite solicitude.

Ah! There it was, the first quick sight of the viper's tongue. The spider, with praiseworthy consideration for his guest's comfort, was gracefully inviting the fly to its doom.

Maine eyed him grimly.

"I heard you had a bar here," he said. "It was one of the reasons that I came here."

"Then come along in and have a drink."

"The pleasure," said Maine, without a smile, "will be all mine!"

Henri, with a slight bow of acceptance, was halfway down the hall.

Maine followed till he got as far as the barroom door. There he halted rudely and stared inside, taking stock of the none too prepossessing surroundings.

The barroom was an oddity. It had no window. The walls appeared to have been recently built, and there was only one door. The whole place was no more than twelve feet square. It was, in fact, little more than a serving annex to the dining-room, a sort of specially built stillroom in which the cold viands were carved before being taken through to the tables.

Sitting at two small tables, smoking, were half a dozen Chinamen. Maine watched Henri like a cat watching a mouse. But he made no sign to them as he entered. Not even a muscle twitched. Maine would have sworn his life on that.

The yellow men regarded him silently as he went over to the tiny bar. He propped his back against the angle of the wall and the counter.

Four of the Chinamen finished off their drinks and padded softly out. The other two, having taken thorough stock of him, turned and resumed the staccato drone of their conversation. Whatever trap he had walked into was apparently already prepared, a set stage waiting only for the curtain to go up.

"Whisky?" asked Henri.

Maine shrugged.

"It doesn't matter much, does it?" he said. "You don't think I'm going to drink any of your filthy concoctions, do you?"

A swift glitter leaped into Henri's eyes, but it was gone again in a second. Maine's ears, straining to pick up a clue from anywhere, detected a momentary break in the drone of voices in the corner; a break of sheer surprise at the coolness of it. Henri, with magnificent restraint, appeared not to have heard. He walked behind the bar counter to pour out the drinks.

MAINE tapped at the wall behind him. Steel! There was no mistaking that hard, ungiving surface. His eyes slid across to the door. It was wide open, and he could see the sectional view down the edge. The door was a sheet of steel, too, thinly surfaced over with three-ply board. Instinctively he looked up at the ceiling.

Save for the patent fire-alarm grid in the centre, it was an unbroken sweep of white, and he couldn't see whether it was steel or not. But he formed a pretty shrewd conviction that nothing short of dynamite or an automatic drill would have got through it.

"H'm. All very nice and comfy in here," he said largely. "Steel roof, steel walls, steel door, steel floor—what's the big idea, Henri?" He glanced at his watch. Half-past seven and just beginning to get really dark. The Chinamen had ceased talking. This queer devil with the hard voice and the balefully free speech was something new to them, a fish from the depths unplumbed. They couldn't quite place him.

Somewhere down in the inner recesses of his make-up he seemed to harbour something of their own immutable fatalism, some old allegiance to the code of the East. One fact, at least, stood out all over him—he didn't give a damn for the crowd of them.

Brinsley's opinion of Maine's visit to Hendry's Temperance was that "there would be flamin' hell to pay out at Ewell"—but even he would have been a little unprepared for the particular brand of Tophet that Maine handed out to the astonished crowd in that bar.

The tension in the place was rapidly getting desperate, unbearable. It was like that electric, nerve-wracking second that comes between the flash and the crash in a thunderstorm.

Maine never gave them a chance to spring their mine. He sprang his, with a courage and a defiance that left them gasping.

Henri pushed over a glass of neat whisky. Quicker than they could follow, Maine took it and swilled it up at the ceiling. In a neat, squirting stream it sped upward and soaked against the little box grid in the centre of the ceiling. Then with a jump he was over at the door—with a wicked-looking gun glittering in his fingers. The door slammed in his face with a jarring crash that shook the bottles on the wall.

"That's your game, is it!" he growled.

His brown, rocklike fingers turned the key, and with a savage twist he broke it off short in the lock. The two yellowskins sprang to their feet in that same second; but Maine had wheeled, the gun cutting a rapid, unceasing arc from them to the amazed face behind the bar and back again.

"Back! Stand back, you scum of the back channels!" he snarled. "Back, or I'll drill you so full of nickel you'll want a steam navvy to lift your damned coffins. Hey! Henri—out of that! Get over with those rats! Hustle, you dog!"

The two Chinamen shrank back, appalled. There was something horrible in that voice, something that went down deeper than recklessness, deeper than desperation, something that had the sound of finality about it—the voice of a killer, out to kill.

Henri, white-faced and rat-eyed, slid round the bar. As he came through the counter-flap his hand dropped swiftly to something out of sight behind the bar. And in that moment Maine hit him. A full-shouldered smash to the chin—with the gun still clenched in his hand. The force of the impact sent the master spy's head back as though on a pivot. Maine swung at him again, and Henri, with a jawbone that sagged horribly open, went shrieking round the bar.

Maine leaped on the counter, his fingers fumbling for a match. He struck it, a single hissing scratch across the ceiling. There was a tiny little *woof!* as the whisky ignited on the fire alarm. It burned there fiercely, a blue-hot torch in the middle of the white.

The two Chinamen, risking all in a sudden grim uprising of courage, vaulted the table as Maine leaped down from the counter. They came on, murder in their eyes, fingers clawing for the throat. And Maine pitched into them like a mad dog. For some seconds there was nothing to be seen in the bar but a wildly revolving blur of arms and legs and

bodies, punctuated at erratic intervals by the ferocious smack of a bony fist on bony flesh—and the agonised shrieking of the half-demented Henri over all.

One of the Chinamen went reeling out of the battle with a smashed face. He staggered against the bar, swaying for a moment, trying to still the amazing whirlpool that was spinning about in his brain. His hand crawled out to a table-knife lying on a plate of stale, uneaten sandwiches. He gripped it and leaped in again, mouthing like an animal.

He leaped in—sheer onto Maine's foot, which lunged out like a battering-ram and took him flush in the pit of the stomach. The Chinaman gasped and went livid, and then, dropping the knife, toppled to the floor, rolling about in a constricted ball. Maine pitched the other one at him, an inanimate bundle of flesh and bone, black in the face and unconscious from the sudden grip of the fingers that had strangled half the life out of his windpipe.

"Corral me in a blasted hole like this, will you?" rasped Maine, red-eyed and panting. "You swine. I'll roast the whole damn boiling of you!"

He swayed over to the bar and sent a huge glass urn of whisky flying off the counter. Its teammate full of gin followed, and was backed up by the brandy vat. The stuff spread out in ever-widening pools on the floor.

Bells were ringing at the back of the house, and a fierce pounding of fists sounded on the locked doors.

"Hear that?" roared Maine. "That means the brigade will be here in five minutes. That alarm rings direct to the station. And by heck! I'll give them something to come for!"

He swished another match down the counter and the fumes took the light.

"Dance—you murderous hounds!" he yelled at them. "Show me what sort of a bluff you put up against the fire corps. Can't get into Miss Warden's room, can't I? A helmet and a fire escape will have her in hospital inside an hour!"

THE less badly injured Chinaman had crawled to the door and was screaming Chinese gibberish at his friends outside. There was a rattling in the lock, and the broken head of the key fell into the room. Another key outside rasped in the lock and the door shot open.

Maine's gun spat twice and there was a helter-skelter scamper down the hall. Whatever else they might fancy out there, the sight of a cold-eyed lunatic behind an automatic failed utterly to tally with their views.

Maine followed them up, regardless. He put a match to every curtain he passed. The fire raced up the thin lace and licked along the window-sashes. The building was old. Dry rot was already beginning to tell its tale among the timbers. In a few moments the lower floor was a raging furnace, and the poisoners, half crazy with fright, were scattering out into the open country around. And Hendry's Temperance was going up to meet the clouds in a high, wide mushroom of yellow smoke.

When the brigade arrived—the Epsom motor engines followed hot on the pounding heels of the local apparatus—it was to find a holocaust blazing among the trees, a pyramid of fire, with, perched halfway up it precariously on a window-ledge, a human fly—out of the web—smashing at a window.

They got a drugged girl down, Maine standing over them and offering to fillet with his bare fists any man who challenged his authority.

There was a wide-eyed crowd gathering out in the roadway, a crowd that gazed with cow-like interest at the excitement that was giving their little country parish something to talk about for weeks to come.

Through that crowd charged a motor side-car combination, with a particularly grim-eyed driver at the handlebars. He skidded to a standstill at Maine's side.

"O. K.?" he drawled, and gazed at the hissing cone of fire. "Chief sent us along to keep on your tail," he added, ignoring Maine's look of puzzled surprise.

"Oh!" said Maine, and looked down at the side-car. "Going anywhere with that car of yours?"

"Nope," said the Flying Squad man. "Want a nice, kind, quiet little hospital for the gal?"

"Yes."

"One down the road a mile. I'll come with you and convince the doctor. Looks to me like a dopey."

In silence they sped down to the hospital. The detective's credentials got the girl admitted without a question. Maine left what instructions he thought necessary, and a few minutes later they were racing back to London in the car.

"Where's Lewis?" asked Maine, after a long interval of silence.

"Went down river, according to 'phone report. There's merry hell breaking loose down there. Oh—and Jack Castle has been stamping on the bell ever since you left. Says he's got the big news for you."

Maine lay back in the side-car. "In that case," he said, "would you mind stamping on the gas?"

CHAPTER VIII

SILK HAT PARADE

THE dividing line between drama and comedy is drawn so fine that there are times when it almost merges. In the matter of the night raid on the Millwall headquarters of the river police, the two elements actually overlapped.

It was, as Sir Everard Lewis subsequently admitted, a sight for the gods on High Olympus to see over two dozen thick-chested, heavy-hipped policemen climbing diffidently into long frock coats and wrestling profanely with the queer intricacies of white kid spats. And surely only a theatrical producer could have thoroughly appreciated the choicest bouquet of farce that hovered transiently over the spectacle of those same ponderously reliable gentlemen standing sideways to the tall mirrors, heads thrown back in the true gesture of the rare sporty boy, eyeing themselves over their shoulders in all the glory of high top hats, canes and suede gloves.

But for the bulbous presence of loaded truncheons and magazine automatics bulking heavy on their thighs, the episode might well have touched down to a point of burlesque. The whole thing seemed a fit setting for farce—with music.

But the constables were not seeing the funny side of it. They had just had a short, bone-hard ten minutes with Lewis himself. And the chief had given them their atmosphere in all its harsh reality. They saw the job as it *would* be, not as it might be. Orientals are not exactly Bayards when the situation calls for fight. A Chinese roughhouse is a grisly affair, a silent, murderous business, with all the primeval instincts and hates kept miraculously subordinated to the higher art of jabbing a slick knife into the back, or breaking a neck with a single crack of a sandbag that comes soundlessly out of nowhere. And the police had no illusions regarding their own ends. It would be raw stuff that would be flying about down there by the river, stark stuff with the gloves off and every man for himself.

Castle's report had gone to show that half Limehouse had got wind of the police activities. Chinatown was slowly a seething yeast, with the blow-off likely to happen at any moment. Lewis knew now beyond a doubt that Vorst commanded bigger forces than even Kellard Maine dreamed. Half the great Tongs, the secret organizations of the Yellow Empire, were in league with the Death Maker. Lewis knew it from reports that came through continuously from the inner heart of Chinatown.

Outside in the long courtyard a great motor van waited at the kerb, panting softly to the cool of the night. It was a huge thing. On its raking tarpaulin hood was painted the name of a firm of wholesale market gardeners, a name that stood bond for anything in the mellifluous purlieus of Covent Garden. At the wheel was an unconcerned-looking driver in clump boots, heavy leggings and an old army coat.

Brinsley went out and spoke to him. As a result the man backed the clumsy-looking vehicle into the inner yard.

Apparently Lewis was taking no chances. The road through Scotland Yard is a public thoroughfare and Lewis was not exposing his coup to the casual eye of anyone who might choose to hang around that way.

One by one the constables climbed in, hauling themselves up gingerly by a rope swinging from the rear strut.

The driver screwed round in his seat and regarded the performance with slight surprise. He cocked a leery eye at Brinsley and jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Queer sort of load, that, ain't it, mate?" he suggested. "Wot are they? Fancy dress contingent for the Halbert 'All?"

"You just keep your eyes front, my cocker," growled Brinsley. "You're paid to take a load of spuds down to Millwall—and to forget about it within ten seconds of having dropped it. Get that?"

The driver chuckled. "Gor blimey!" he muttered. "'Ow the 'ell many more is they goin' to crowd into my bus?" He stared in open amazement at the endless stream of top-hatted figures climbing into his lorry.

"There will be thirty all told. And you'll obey orders without making a fuss or looking as though you were even listening for instructions coming from behind you."

"Easy!" said the driver blandly. "But s'elp me if I ever had such a cargo under me hood before! Not a one of these cops weighs less'n three hundredweight—some a bit more by the looks of their belts. That's darn near five ton of policemen! Gawd! What a set-out!"

Brinsley climbed in behind and wormed his way through the press to the front of the lorry. He had a couple of peepholes on either side, and a big jagged tear in the tarpaulin just behind the driver through which he could give his instructions.

In a few seconds the van was gliding along the Embankment and up towards the Admiralty Arch. Lewis was leaving nothing to chance. The lorry was under orders to make an ostensible journey up into its own neigh-

borhood in order to throw possible scouts off the track.

Up Whitehall it went, over Trafalgar Square into the Strand, turned sharply up through Bedford Street into the Garden. For a few minutes it cruised around, stopping and backing against various piles of vegetables, and eventually, after the driver had climbed down and regaled himself at a carman's pull-up with a big mug of tea and the contents of a piece of old newspaper, resumed its journey.

BY MIDNIGHT the streets of London are empty. In no great city on earth does the day life fail so abruptly and so completely as in London. After the chaos and welter of the traffic-throttled streets by day and the pandemonium of the homebound theatre crowds at eleven o'clock, the emptiness of the streets soon after midnight is almost impressive.

The big van took full advantage of the shiny desert of wood blocks and asphalt. In half an hour it was far down in the East End, threading its way through lines of gloomy-looking warehouses. Every minute brought it nearer and nearer to the ambush that had been prepared for it with even greater subtlety than Everard Lewis knew.

Lewis at least knew that Vorst was aware of police intervention. He knew that the message from Millwall was nothing more than a decoy, and he had a fairly shrewd conviction that somewhere at the back of this new departure he would find Jaan Vorst himself directing operations with all the coolness and vision of the inspired organiser he undoubtedly was.

Lewis himself would have given his nod of authoritative approval had he known where Vorst had made his headquarters for that night's work. Quietly ensconced in the private bar of the Galleons Three, he sat and supped delicately at a cup of strong black coffee with all the disinterested concern of a man who has a thousand years to live and finds nothing but boredom in the prospect. For days the "Galleons Three" had been under peeled eye observation. But it was so obvious that none but a born fool would ever use the place again, that Castle had taken his sleuths off and posted them elsewhere. Knowing that, Vorst chose it as the ideal centre of his bivouac.

He gazed at the table, on which a problem presented itself—whether to build up on the aces, or work down on the kings, for Vorst, being immersed in a solitaire game, was playing himself against the Fates.

A tall, sinewy figure entered the bar, leaned against the counter and slowly drank a glass of curaçao. After a little while, since conversation with the girl behind the bar appeared to revolve round the single topic of whether or no Steve Donoghue could bring off the double event, he walked over and sat with one leg on the table by Vorst's card lay-out.

Vorst did not look up. Very deliberately and very wisely he decided that it would be far more judicious to build down from the kings and give a very excellent opportunity every chance of success.

"Well?" he murmured, almost inaudibly.

"I got the message through. Lewis himself came to the phone. He answered me. I think it has worked all right." Dassi, idly looking at the cards, softly retailed the information to his own chief.

"You told him? All I said?"

"He called another to listen in at the other end. I could hear him breathing in the telephone while Lewis was talking."

Vorst pulled thoughtfully at his lower lip. "Very good!" he breathed. "He is suspicious. He will come down himself. We shall get him as we got the others. Perhaps Maine, too, will be there."

A frown puckered across the forehead of the man sitting on the table.

"Maine?" he said. "Henri failed?"

A wicked look came into Vorst's eyes. "They let him get away!" he said coldly. His voice was as cutting as a saw. "There were twelve of them—and he got away! He got my girl away, too. Dassi, you will have to beat Maine yourself if you want that woman. He got her to the hospital. You will have to be clever."

Dassi seemed unable to believe the truth.

"Tchah!" hissed Vorst. "Fools! Fools! There is not one ounce of brain among them all. Henri himself is a dummy, a wax-brained fool if a plan miscarries an inch. He cannot adapt himself to an emergency. He got into a panic . just because Maine used that little bit of brain that is up under every man's skull. Think of this, the telephone was cut. There was no living soul within a quarter of a mile to help him. It was not humanly possible for him to have communicated with anyone outside that house—except by the way we overlooked; the way he found. Devil! He burned the fire alarm with Henri's own poisoned whisky. Half the fire brigades in the country were there within half an hour. Henri is a child if things go wrong. Twelve of them—and they couldn't hold Maine!"

Dassi tried to assimilate the full portent of it. He found it difficult. The thing had got rather beyond him. All he could see was the real necessity for murder—the immediate elimination of Kellard Maine before the in-

dividual could make contact again with Scotland Yard. Once Maine got through to Lewis with his new dossier of information, Dassi could see the break-up of their central hub of organisation.

"I will go to Ewell myself," he purred. "I will go to Hendry's and find Maine!"

Vorst dropped a seven under an eight and ran a whole wing down.

"You won't," he said. "Kellard Maine smashes as he goes. First my underwater forcing house—now Hendry's. Neither place will ever be of use to me again in this campaign. There is not a stick or a stone standing of that place out at Ewell. Burned the place to the ground. The full report has come through to me. Half an hour ago. They got him into the bar—my God! they actually got him into the bar—and they couldn't hold him. Maine beat them at their own game. He took the offensive—and Henri was lost."

"But—but—" Dassi looked weakly at his chief.

"Listen!" said Vorst savagely. "Hendry's Temperance Hotel is burned to the ground. Of all that beautifully planned rendezvous back there among the trees, there is not a wall standing. Maine had one chance in a million of getting out of the barroom alive. And he saw it. What is more, he took it! New arrangements must be made tonight. Hendry's organisation is scattered. Maine actually told the local police the whole story. Enough evidence was discovered among the smoking ruins to convince them.

"If more proof were needed, they had it in the doctor's evidence at the hospital. The girl was still unconscious; they found the morphine puncture in her arm. Her name did the rest. Henri had fled! And with him all his staff. They are dotted about the countryside now, trying to get into touch with me—but too frightened of their own skins to show themselves in London. Henri himself has a broken jaw—the pain will drive him to surrender."

Dassi called softly for another glass of his favourite kick.

"And Maine?" he muttered.

"Will be back in Scotland Yard before Henri has time even to let me know the worst." Vorst sat back and took in a long, slow breath. "You had better wait for Maine yourself," he said. "Give him no warning. Just death. Quick and soundless. He must not live through the night. Maine is the one man on earth who— You understand?"

Dassi did not answer. He was feeling against his hip for the thin, highly polished little instrument that reposed there, and his eyes turned out through the old mullioned windows of the Galleons Three to where the dim red glory of the lights of London shone softly on the underbreasts of the clouds.

VORST leaned towards him. "You have no illusions about the coming of the police tonight?" he asked.

Dassi looked a mute inquiry at him.

"Lewis knows your message was a fake," he answered quietly. "He was intended to know. Your conversation with him was a carefully planned blunder. Do you think the chief of all the police of London did not know there was no river station in Millwall? Do you think he didn't know there was no emergency call for the river patrol?" He smiled a callous grin of anticipation. "I know Lewis's methods. There will be a round-up in Limehouse tonight. He will scour the area with picked men. He will come down himself to direct operations. He will send a decoy to Millwall. I have already arranged for it. The decoy will die with the rest of them. Three men are detailed to follow him and silence him. I myself will deal with Lewis. I shall want a lot of information from him before Sir Everard's body goes into the lime pit."

An unlovely looking down-and-out entered the bar, tapping his way softly with a blackthorn held out before him. He meandered through the room, his sightless eyes raised dully to the ceiling, a tray of pipe-cleaners, collar-studs, bootlaces and matches suspended from his neck by a cord. The singsong drone of his voice was raised in a monotonous chant: "Cigar-lights, laces—laces, cigar-lights."

He tapped his way round to where Vorst sat and paused there for a moment. "Cigar-lights, laces—laces, cigar-lights," he whined, and the stick came out very deliberately and felt all round the table. It came to rest on the only other person there.

"All right, Charles," said Dassi. "He's here."

The blind man's fingers came out from under his tray. A piece of paper fluttered down to the table. Vorst picked it up. "Cigar-lights, laces—laces, cigar-lights," he called. The down-and out and the voice were tapping out of the bar.

Vorst smoothed out the paper and read it. It was a mass of Chinese characters, painted in a rich vermilion and very crudely done. But Vorst deciphered it. It was a message he had been waiting for.

"Come at once to Millwall," it said. "Lewis has been seen and is being followed. Local police appear to have been warned. Plain-clothes men are patrolling in threes. Send urgent instructions."

Vorst tore the paper into tiny pieces and dropped them into his coffee-cup. The strong

caffeine content slowly obliterated the painted characters. He made a quick gesture to Dassi. "Get away up to the Yard," he said. "I'll attend to everything at this end. You get Maine before he has time to get into the building. You will find three others up there. Get a report from them and get your bearings."

Vorst slipped out into the night. A swift car took him along through the mean streets till he reached the end of the road where the ambush was laid. Two other men slipped out of the shadows and joined him. It was dark and dismal along that road. Half the lights in the street lamps appeared to have been turned off—an old dodge in that neighborhood. A big Crossley lorry passed them trundling slowly up the road.

"We saw him up at the top there," said one of the new arrivals. It was the man with the withered finger.

"You're sure it was Lewis?" whispered Vorst.

"Only Lewis—or a fool—would come down here in a top hat, spats and a frock coat."

Vorst nodded.

"Who is with him?" he asked.

"Two of the guards on the farm."

"Look," hissed the other. The three of them crouched back into the shadows. A shortish, rather stout figure was approaching them. He was dressed in a frock coat, top hat and spats. Very leisurely he walked down the road, passed them and turned the corner. And there were no trailing shadows behind him.

"That wasn't Lewis," snapped Vorst.

"No, and it wasn't the guy we saw at the top end," came the puzzled reply.

"Follow him—report back here as quickly as you can!"

The man slid silently away in the wake of the vanished figure. In a few seconds he was up behind him, dogging along at his heels like a black ghost. A hundred yards up the road he stopped dead in utter bewilderment. Coming towards him was another top-hatted, frock-coated individual, with a black cane in his hand and spats on his insteps. His astonishment increased a hundredfold when yet a third crossed the road towards him from a narrow bylane. And then higher up he saw two more, walking within a few yards of each other, yet apparently entirely oblivious of each other's presence.

After that his recollection became clouded over with the sudden miasmic haze that is induced by the unexpected but terrific impact of a loaded truncheon. It took him at the base of the skull and seemed to sink right into his stunned brain. The whole street swam mistily before his eyes, but somehow, as a sort of static centre in the middle of a nebulous sea of diaphanous mist, he had a vague impression of a huge Crossley tender that slid almost soundlessly round the corner, of a couple of frock-coated but hatless gentlemen who leaped out of it, handcuffed him and shoved him into the back of the van like a sack of coal. A deep voice said, "That's the ninth—not so bad, considering. Bloke with the withered finger, too. Well, we've got him, anyhow. All right, driver. Keep straight on and don't try to look too interested. You'll give the damned game away before you're through."

The lorry drifted smoothly on and turned into the main road again. At the far end it passed two figures, which, five seconds before its headlights played where they had stood, had made a flying jump from the kerb into the entrance of a dark passage.

Vort's eyes narrowed to little black dots.

"This is getting hellishly mixed," he said uncomfortably. "I seem to have seen that lorry before." He tried to take its number, but its tail light was so dim that even at twenty yards the number plate was blurred and indecipherable.

He muttered something blasphemous under his breath and drew back farther into the darkness of the passage. Yet another silk-hatted figure was walking airily down the opposite pavement, swinging a jaunty black cane and humming softly to himself. Three men dressed in the height of midday fashion at midnight—and in the drabbest, dingiest end of Millwall. The thing was too ludicrously impossible to be plausible. Yet there they were. Vorst had seen two of them with his own eyes.

And then the big Crossley lorry slid slowly into view again, idling along on top gear down the level stretch of road.

Vorst knew without looking that it was the same van.

His deductive faculties centred on the van and focussed there. Whatever was the explanation of this astounding mystery, its solution was all bound up in the movements of that van.

•

DEFTLY he slipped out of his hiding-place and vanished noiselessly down the road, avoiding all pedestrians with the slippery ease of a shadow. One by one he began rounding up his observation posts. All the way round the ambush he went, making the entire circuit of the trap. There were seven observation points, and he made swift inquiries at each. And they all had the same amazing story to tell. Sir Everard Lewis was everywhere. At the top of the street, strolling in every by-road, pausing in every cul-de-sac.

He was in three or four places at once, and sometimes when danger threatened, he vanished like a puff of smoke.

And no matter from where he vanished, he bobbed up again elsewhere with equal facility. One moment there would be a wide, empty street with not a living soul in it as far as the eye could reach. Then the lorry would pass that way and, marvel of marvels, there would be three Sir Everard Lewises strolling nonchalantly along.

Vorst took it all in and said not a word. His temper was becoming the wickedest thing on earth. He was beginning to see light. The finer subtleties of the police chief were slowly becoming apparent.

For every station was reporting the mysterious disappearance of scouts. One point declared themselves almost out of action. Out of a staff of ten men guarding a main approach only three were left. It was not even enough to maintain an efficient messenger service to the other trap points. No one knew where they had gone or whether they were alive or dead. They had just vanished, and a curtain of silence had descended upon their exit.

Vorst stalked off, a vicious, lowering figure muttering unnamable things under his breath.

One thing was becoming clear as day to him. It was burning in his brain like a white-hot coal. One of those top-hatted, spatted decoys was Lewis himself. He was there, in Millwall, at the head of his men, directing one of the cleverist bits of subterfuge ever put up to fuddle the criminal brain. There was no getting away from that. He could feel it, could feel the very presence of an intellect that was beating his and holding it up to ridicule.

The lorry swam into his vision again. It halted a few yards up the road. Something had gone wrong with the engine. The driver climbed down and raised the bonnet, with Brinsley fuming at him from the body of the van.

Vorst approached, all his courage bottled up and crystallised into one vast desire to tear the mystery out of the heart of that lorry. He drew abreast of it, and the driver suddenly wheeled and shot across the road like a catapulted stone. Brinsley, inside the van, nearly went off into apoplexy. The driver he had been slanging all night long was Sir Everard Lewis.

Vorst, with a gasp, wheeled and shot round the corner. Down a passage he dived and over a long line of low garden walls, whistling shrilly at each jump. And hard at his heels pounded Lewis, with his gun out, taking pot shots at him as he went.

At the end of the gardens, Vorst paused as he got to the top of a higher wall. Then he wriggled away like an ugly python into the blackness. Lewis, a jump behind him, leaped at the capstone of the wall. His hand gripped it and a terrific pain shot up his arm. He staggered back and looked at his hand. There was a deep triangular gash in it and it was turning black.

Two hundred yards away Vorst made the water steps. A motorboat was panting there gently. "Quick! The germ-farm!" he hissed.

He was into the boat and casting off the single mooring rope before his man had got the clutch in. The boat slid slowly into the middle of the river and turned downstream, the motorman silent and grim at the tiller, Vorst crouching down into the covering shelter of the motor house.

The boat shot into top speed with a roar, the white water creaming over and over at the forefoot and a wide wake of foam tumbling away astern.

Fifty yards astern, another boat, without a whit of light on board and with engines running as silently as a steamer's turbines, pushed its nose out into the stream and followed along in its wake. And the man at the wheel was Castle of the river police.

For many minutes there was a jarring silence, save for the steady panting of Vorst pumping the air into his lungs.

Then came the motorman's hoarse whisper: "What happened, boss?"

"Lewis—played—aces," answered Vorst from the darkness. "Played the whole string—and they were—all—trumps."

"Did you stop one?"

"No. Winded. Chased me over a whole street of backyard walls. The trap didn't work. It couldn't. There were too many birds in it. Lewis filled it so full there wasn't room to close the door. He's got half our crowd down there—been touring a big Crossley, picking 'em off one by one, hocussing them and dumping them in the van. The best half of my London staff have been wiped up. Lewis played right back into my bluff—and trumped me!"

"Strewth! But why didn't—"

"Nothing. That's the answer—and you bite your teeth on that. None of our men had ever seen Lewis, except perhaps Dassi and Four-fingers. And the ambush was full of them! There were dozens of him! Station Street has as many as half a score at once all parading up and down, with the big Crossley on their tail every minute. None of our men knew which one to go for. And we were being decimated all the time. The longer the trap stood open the less men there were to work

it For God's sake get hold of Dassi and prime him. Get him and tell him all that's happened. Tell him I'm launching the big stuff tonight. We've only got hours left to do it in. We must strike while the chance is still open. Send out the call. A phone call to Lang Hi at his eating-house will do it. Tell him it's the call he's been waiting for."

The motorman pushed his hat back and wiped a handkerchief over his wet forehead.

"You—you haven't got Lewis?" he jerked. "Not—not so's the others will find him?"

"Couldn't be helped," snarled back Vorst. "You can't make funeral arrangements for a man who's chasing along ten yards behind you loosing off with a Webley at every jump. He got his, got it red hot. Gave him the Black Triangle at the last trap, and he's all sprawled out there waiting for the first one to find him. The game's up now for good. I've got to rush things now or clear out. They've shut down on the press, so I'll have to take it in the dark. I've got Maine to thank for that, curse him. Say, can't you shake another mile out of that car of yours?"

THE police boat was badly tailed off in the first half-mile, but as he flashed along by Wapping Stairs, Sergeant Castle got in a spell of high-speed work with the signal lamp. A tug on the other side hooted sonorously in response, and the signal was taken up and relayed down river by other apparently uninterested craft. In that swift moment Castle's grip on the river system vindicated itself. Three hundred yards ahead of Vorst another boat, unlighted and driven by silently running electric motors, drove out into the darkness from the shore.

For a few minutes the chase went on in a headlong rush, with Vorst unconscious of the presence of the boat ahead. Then, with helm hard over, the Death Maker swept round in a wide arc and headed for the bank.

Black shadows were piled up along the wharves in great, high-reaching blocks. And there was an absence of light. The whole sweep of the river was pitched in a gloom of oppressive darkness, save for an unwinking blob of yellow here and there at the stairheads. Vorst shot off his engine, and the resultant silence seemed suddenly to be filled with a noise that hurt the straining eardrums of the night. The motorboat careered on, driving full tilt into the shadows. It seemed almost as though he held his course to take him headlong into the giant skeleton of a towering wharf. The boat ahead demi-volted in a twenty-yard turn that shipped her half full of water.

Vorst swished in among the shadows, right into the very heart of them, just when a head-on collision seemed inevitable. And at that same moment he vanished—slid off the face of the water as completely as though he had never existed.

Ten seconds later the leading police boat nosed its way in and tied up to the huge pile where Vorst's boat had performed its conjuring trick. Castle was on the scene a few minutes later. He took a swift look at the scene and then sent the patrol boat back to get into urgent touch with Maine.

While waiting he did a little reconnoitering on his own, and by the time Maine had come through he had got his own ideas fairly well formulated and justified.

The river was at half-tide, a condition that exposed an opening in the wharf timbers just large enough to permit the ingress of a low-built motorboat. It was a structural breach in the massive teakwood girder piles on which the wharf was built. At high tide it would be almost covered, but for three-fifths of the tide-table the opening would be deep enough to let a boat through. Once inside, a small boat would be effectually screened—the interior was, in fact, something like a huge wooden cavern, affording shelter and secrecy to anything that came in through the flaw in the girders.

There were one or two snags inside, and Castle scraped his keel badly on submerged timber baulks. The second one buckled one of his screws and knocked him out of any subsequent speed work.

Maine arrived under the hour in the fast boat. He nodded silent thanks to Castle, and without a word took charge of operations that were to be, of necessity, peculiarly his own.

High up in the wall was a black circular opening. It looked like nothing so much as the outfall of a street main or sewer, and a tiny stream of water falling from it substantiated the disguise.

Maine flashed an electric torch on it.

"That's the hole where the rat goes to ground," he said quietly. "Jack, go and get Hollis. Get him quickly. Back of that hole is the germ-farm, with enough living horrors in it to kill off all England in a month. And something pretty desperate is going to happen in there before the dawn lifts again over London. One of us, either Vorst or myself, is going to come out through that hole feet first. Give me your gun, will you?"

Jack Castle passed over his gun without a word. There was enough dominance in that face just then to have overawed Scotland Yard itself. All the old bitterness was there, the old wintry hungriness for a chance to come

to grips with Vorst. And there was something else, too. A cold relentlessness that gave him something of the look of a wild animal going out to do battle for all its tribe against an invader who held all the odds: a resolute, icy determination that glittered in his eyes and steadied his nerves till his hands were as rocklike as brown marble, without a quiver, without a twitch.

Castle watched him go, a quick-moving figure that hauled itself up to the tunnel entrance and vanished noiselessly into it. He waited for a few minutes listening, with straining ears, to the omnipotent silence that hung about. Then, in the fast boat, he sped back to get Hollis, who, with his master knowledge of poison lore, was the only ally in all London who could help the man who had already thrust himself into the death-trap.

But Maine was destined to get no help from Hollis that night. The old doctor, bluffing himself to the last, was flat out on the laboratory floor, a scalpel in one hand, a microscopic slide that was yelling aloud a string of warnings in the other. He was run down like an overwound clock, while the telephone bell squealed and shouted above his head. The killing hours at the test bench, the long nights without sleep or rest, the passage of the years over his aging frame, and the sudden reaction of the drug, had told their tale. Hollis was far away in a dreamless world, a world that was blank and dead, peopled by nothing but the utter peace of the unconscious. Whatever terrors awaited Kellard Maine at the other end of the tunnel head would have to be faced alone. Hollis was out.

CHAPTER IX

THE GERM-FARM

VORST closed the trap-door that led up from the entrance tunnel and switched on a vast system of lights. He was in a giant warehouse, a place that looked like the huge storerooms of some great chemical manufactory.

Heaped around in massive shelves against all the walls were long lines of cylinders and glass carboys. Thousands of long glass bottles stacked the floors, and packing cases full of coloured tubes filled the recesses and anterooms. Vorst's terrific stroke was on the point of consummation.

The cases were all labelled and ticketed with their various destinations. There were whole series bound for the great overpopulated centres of the industrial towns. For days his agents in the Army and Navy headquarters had been waiting in hourly expectation of receiving their consignments of innocuous-looking merchandise. Aldershot, Chatham, Devonport, Portsmouth, Colchester, anywhere and everywhere where the effective fighting forces of the Empire were concentrated, were all marked down and organised as special disseminating centres for epidemics. Men coming up on leave would scatter death to the four corners of the islands. Some of the tubes contained cultures that would not become virulent for days. But they were all there incubating and multiplying a millionfold, feeding on the scientific sustenance in the tubes.

Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, Birmingham, Hudersfield, Edingburgh, all the great towns of the North were marked down for the sudden slaughter that would annihilate their populations. The West and the Midlands were all amply provided for with the ghastly things in the bottles and tubes. The great cylinders, labelled *Oxygen, with care,* that were to be sunk in the springs of all the rivers of the kingdom were stacked ready against the secret doors that opened out on the wharf.

In the morning would come the great motor lorries, ordinary everyday motor lorries, that would cart them away to their destinations. There would be no contact at all with the railways or any other public system of transport whose servants might become suspicious, or where occasional delays of transport might upset the program. The lorries were to take them all the way. The whole consignment was to go out in vast relays. Cases and crates and boxes and tubes would be sown through the length and breadth of the land to reap their dreadful harvest of lives. Within the week Britain would be a fever-ridden land of the plagues. The full horror of it would only become apparent when the medical staffs of the hospitals discovered their absolute helplessness to deal with the crises. Where the hospitals had hundreds of beds, they would find they required millions—where there were scores of doctors, thousands would be needed.

And even at that, the medical help available would be powerless in the face of these new diseases Vorst was sowing through the land. The sudden manifestation of two totally "opposite" maladies in every stricken casualty would set the faculty a horrible problem impossible of solution. Nothing could be done to help or relieve the sufferers. The cure for one disease would merely feed and emphasize the virulence of the other. The cases would multiply in millions throughout the

country. Wards, hospitals and casualty stations would be choked and glutted with the dying. And the cleverest doctors in the land would not be able to lift a finger to relieve them.

England in a fortnight would be a shambles of unburied corpses, with thousands more dying every hour. And every minute that passed would see Death in all its blatant terror magnifying its potence in the food and the rivers and the living cattle.

Already vast consignments had gone from that warehouse to Chicago to infect the tinned meat supplies; To Manitoba to make the wheat crops a harvest of death; to Switzerland to make every tin of milk a death-trap for a family. All that was holding up the final sowing of the germs was waiting, pulsing, trembling on a mere word, ready to slip silently into smooth action to take its toll of human life.

VORST walked slowly round the great farm, adjusting steam-wheels here and there to regulate the heat in the various sections. Maine's damning inquisitiveness had already forced his hand unconscionably. He had had to push his whole timetable forward a whole fortnight, and the sudden alteration of plans had resulted in a little natural dislocation of arrangements. The sudden sortie of the Scotland Yard top-hats had shaken the whole fabric of his campaign, and his failure to silence Maine and Lewis was the breaking point.

The great job would have to be done that night. Swift messengers were already flitting round Chinatown, calling up his confederates. Before darkness paled to the new light of another day three hundred silent Asiatics would be in that building, packing and crating the remainder of the cultures, loading them on to the lorries and speeding them off to the ends of the country. In his hand he clutched a great sheaf of telegrams and cables. They were brief and terrible. "Dispatch immediately," was all they said, but wrapped up in their letters were the keys of forty million lives. As soon as the cable officers opened their doors to the morning those messages of doom would be racing across the earth.

There in that laboratory he juggled with the lives of millions. He also juggled with his own, but he did not know it. Kellard Maine knew it, and, inch by inch, the relentless shadow of Maine was crawling upon him through the blazing light, a silent figure of strength that crept with animal-like caution from cover to cover, drawing nearer every minute to the great brooding figure of the poisoner.

Vorst put a great white mask over his face. It was a thick thing, made of a series of medicated cotton-wool filters. Maine was ten yards away, and he could smell its pungent iodoform scent even from there. It almost covered the pitiless eyes. Maine watched him intently as he went over to a line of huge glass containers. Inside them was a mass of what appeared to be a discolored fungi, a brownish pithy-looking mass that had neither shape nor form. Maine recognized them for yet another culture of bacilli approaching the final stages of evolution.

The poisoner looked critically at the thermometers inside the carboys, and, with a syringe, injected some decomposing meat-juice through sealed valves in the lids. They were already labelled for their destinations, and the straw-lined boxes for their transport, prepared in readiness to receive them, were lying just behind them.

The great coup had approached its zero hour, and Vorst was there for no other reason than to set the wheels in motion. He crossed over to a high desk and began writing at a feverish rate.

Maine stepped from his niche and tiptoed towards the crouching figure.

Maine had reached to within four paces of him when his tense eyes noticed that Vorst was no longer writing. His right hand was moving out, so slowly as to be barely perceptible, towards the master-switch of the electric lighting system on the wall-face by his desk. One touch on that key and the whole huge warehouse would be plunged into an impenetrable darkness that was ringed around by death in a hundred hideous forms.

"Move your hand another inch and I'll blow your brains out." The words crackled out like electricity short-circuting on a wet wire.

Vorst, without a word, slowly relaxed.

"Kellard Maine?" He seemed to get the words out with difficulty.

"Yes. Turn round." There was no pity in the answer. It was relentless—hate made vocal.

Vorst slowly turned. And the two of them looked into each other's eyes, a bare three yards between them. There was a massive Service gun in Maine's right hand, and its muzzle pointed without a tremor sheer on the centre of Vorst's forehead.

Vorst shook his head and glanced up at the clock.

"On the wrong track," he said. "In six minutes my staff will arrive. Three hundred of them. All the London organization is concerned in this affair of mine. They are coming now. Already the boats are slipping down

river. Three hundred! Due in six minutes. You haven't one chance in a million of stopping me."

"Three hundred, eh? All the whole boiling of them? Thank God for that. And now let me tell *you* one! Neither you nor any single one of your followers gets out of this place alive."

"One! Against three hundred—and one?" There was gentle mockery in the insinuation.

"Just that!" flared back Maine. There was an angry flush on his face, and his face and his eyes looked hot. At that moment Maine was a man possessed of a single idea—a horrible idea—but he had that forthright quality of tempered steel in his character to such an extent that, in all moments of crisis, his body became the automatic servant of his brain. The thing he intended doing was so terrible and yet so complete that he neither questioned its rectitude nor hesitated to put it into effect.

"Fifteen years ago," he said harshly, "I went to prison—for murdering you! I served the sentence. I have already paid the penalty for the crime of killing you. You get the drift, I hope? The law of this realm is that no man may be placed in jeopardy of his life twice on the same capital charge."

Vorst, with horror dilating the whites of his eyes, suddenly realized the import of Maine's words. He reared up on his stool to make one tremendous leap on the grim avenger. But he never got there. The bullets met him halfway. Maine, cold-eyed and vicious, fired straight at him. One, two, three, four, five, six. The bullets thudded into the great body—Maine could see the shock of their impact on him. The echoes smashed into life in the vaulted roof as the white gouts of power-smoke spurted out.

Vorst collapsed on the stool, his fingers clutching up to his heart. His foot slithered nervelessly from its stance and he toppled headlong to the floor, a look of unutterable bewilderment in his glazing eyes.

Maine reloaded his gun, with fingers as steady and cold as the steel itself. He looked sombrely at the lifeless thing on the floor.

"And now I've committed the crime for which I've already been punished," he muttered. "And—there is not a court of justice in the kingdom which could form a charge against me. I've paid my debt in advance."

He critically examined the loaded cylinder, then, and thrust the weapon back into his pocket. Stooping, he took the safety-mask off the dead man and adjusted it over his own face. Then he dragged the body over and pushed it behind a high tiering of boxes.

THE remainder of his preparations were done at lightning speed. He rifled the desk of every sheet of writing matter he could lay his hands on. There were sheaves of technical formulas there; whole dossiers of notes upon Vorst's investigations into abstruse germ diseases; fully annotated memoranda on his researches into the production of new toxins and remarks on their propagation. One of his greatest finds was a whole lexicon of antidotes, for throughout the whole period of his inquiries Vorst had kept full data of those cultures which produced an antitoxical effect on the species he was evolving. A man of the scientific ability of Dr. Hollis could investigate and scrutinise that literature, sort it out and classify it, and, with qualified help, produce the antidote for almost every horrible disease Jaan Vorst had created.

His last act was the most grisly of all. With the mask pressed close over his mouth and nose he went the whole round of the warehouse and liberated the awful death that was bottled up all around him. He opened the heads of the cylinders, knocked the necks off the carboys, smashed the great glass jars and containers, uncorked the lead-covered tubes, broke open boxes and cracked the contents open to the air.

He pushed over whole rows of deadly jars and then let them splinter to the floor. All the poisons that were to have annihilated the lives of millions of men, women and children were liberated and dispersed into the unventilated air of a building a hundred yards square. Every square inch was a crawling mass of death in a hundred horrible guises. Every square foot contained enough loathsome infection to wipe out a city. The place was reeking and nauseous with death.

Then he fused the lights. He put a screwdriver across the terminals of the main switch and instantaneously a hundred lamps fizzed into white-hot incandescence and burned out. The main fuse itself burst out into a shower of electric blue sparks, and the whole building plunged suddenly into impenetrable darkness. Maine took the screwdriver and tore the fuse-box off the wall, battering and smashing at it till it hung, broken and twisted, from a single wire.

He flashed on his own electric torch and hurried over towards the secret door. There were several locks on it, and he deliberately broke the keys in them, twisting the wards till the locks broke and jammed. Swiftly he made for the tunnel entrance, raised the flap and crawled out. At the far end of the tunnel he took up his position and waited.

The seconds ticked by. Out on the river he could hear the muffled hoot of shipping

moving up and down the dark waterway, and the air blew fresh and cool up the tunnel. He waited on and heard a clock chime the quarters, booming out brazenly in the darkness on the other side of the river.

Then, one by one, silent, stealthy figures began to appear. They came with the shadowy silence of ghosts, dark figures on the blackness of the tunnel, flitting up the narrow approach and vanishing silently into the gloom within. Maine tried to count them. They came out in dozens. Hall Limehouse seemed to be emptying itself into the germ-farm that night.

Excited voices began to whisper at the entrance by the warehouse. Others came pouring up the tunnel and crowded in. Something had gone wrong inside. The staccato chattering of Chinese syllables came down to him, and they debated the matter volubly. Maine couldn't understand a word they said, but their mystification was obvious. Jaan Vorst was not there. They had tried to find him. But something had gone wrong with the lights. They could not get them on and they couldn't understand it. The switches were all right. Perhaps it was the main switch—and they couldn't locate it. The place was as dark as a coal mine. They had tried to find Vorst. They had called him, but got no response.

Still more crowded up, heard the news and pushed through the trap-door to investigate for themselves. Slowly the new arrivals thinned out. A few stragglers came in, and then they, too, petered out. The last of Jaan Vorst's murderers was inside the farm.

Maine crept to the trap-door and slammed the great bar over. To make doubly sure, he got a stout wooden spar and wedged it under the end of the bar, driving it into position with the heel of his boot.

The whole of the great poisoning menace, its staff, its munitions and its dead leader were trapped in a prison of crawling death.

Maine made his way cautiously back over the now half-submerged wood piles and waited there. The tide was coming in, and already the opening in the great timbers was too narrow to permit the ingress of a boat. He propped himself against a massive supporting beam and tried to shut his thoughts down to the peace of the river.

He looked down at his hands. They were steady and unshaking. He was glad of that, too. Now that the thing was done, the thing which had engaged his every waking thought for years on countless years, he had been dreading the reaction.

In a little while Jack Castle came again, a swiftly moving splinter of black on the surface of the stream from far up river. He hailed the wharf softly as he came. Maine stood up, cold and cramped.

"Are you there, Maine?"

"Yes. Come quickly." There was a tired note in Maine's voice.

The boat creamed alongside. Maine stepped into it as it touched the great piles. Castle pushed the tiller over, and the boat headed away upstream again without a further word between them.

AFTER a long silence Castle looked across at him and his eyebrows went up, ever so slightly.

(Continued on page 108)

In the Next Issue

HER WAYS ARE DEATH

By Jack Mann

She was the daughter of the ancient, dark Valkyrs, and he the clever magician who unraveled the murderous depths of the abnormal mind. One step beyond the boundaries of the supernatural world which separated them and one must forever destroy the other. Which would survive, the alluring, lovely witch, or the man who was sent to break her spell?

This fascinating story by one of the great masters of fantasy will feature the June issue. You will find it on your newsstand, together with other immortal fantasy tales, on sale March 19.

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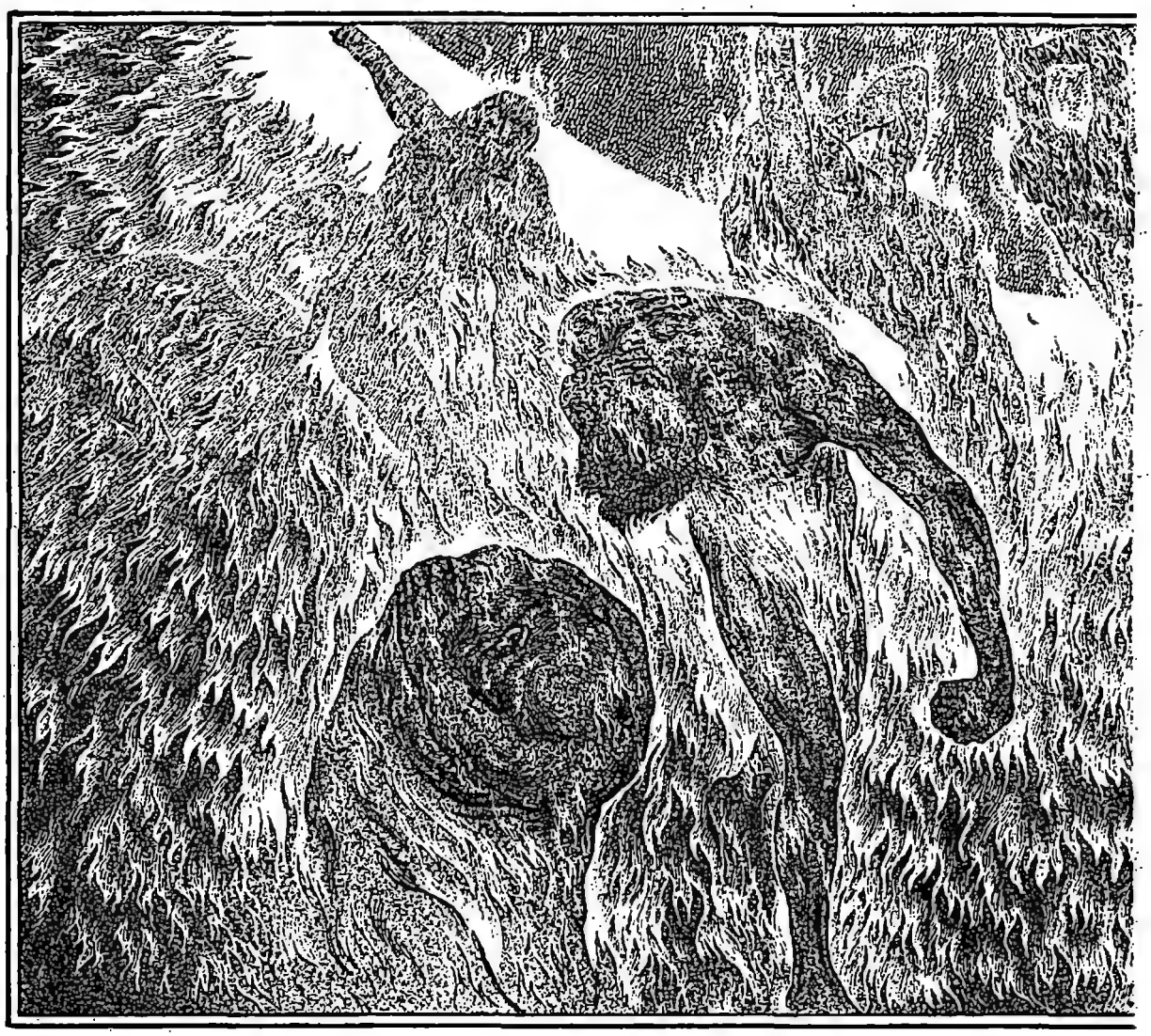

THE NEW SUN

By J. S. Fletcher

FROM the time that he had taken up the study of astronomy as a pleasant means of spending his newly acquired leisure, and had built himself a small but well equipped observatory as an adjunct to his house, Mequillen had formed the habit of rising from his bed every two or three hours of a cloudy night to see if the sky had cleared.

To some men such a habit would have been highly inconvenient, for many obvious reasons. But Mequillen was in a lucky position. He was unmarried; he possessed much more than ample means; he had therefore no business or profession to attend to, and accordingly no train to catch of a morning in order to keep office hours. He could sleep at any time of the day he chose; and if he did jump out of bed at two o'clock in the morning, to find that the sky was still cloudy, he could jump back and go to sleep again on the instant. And he was, moreover, an enthusiast of the first order.

On one night in a certain February, Mequillen, who had gone to bed at ten o'clock, sud-

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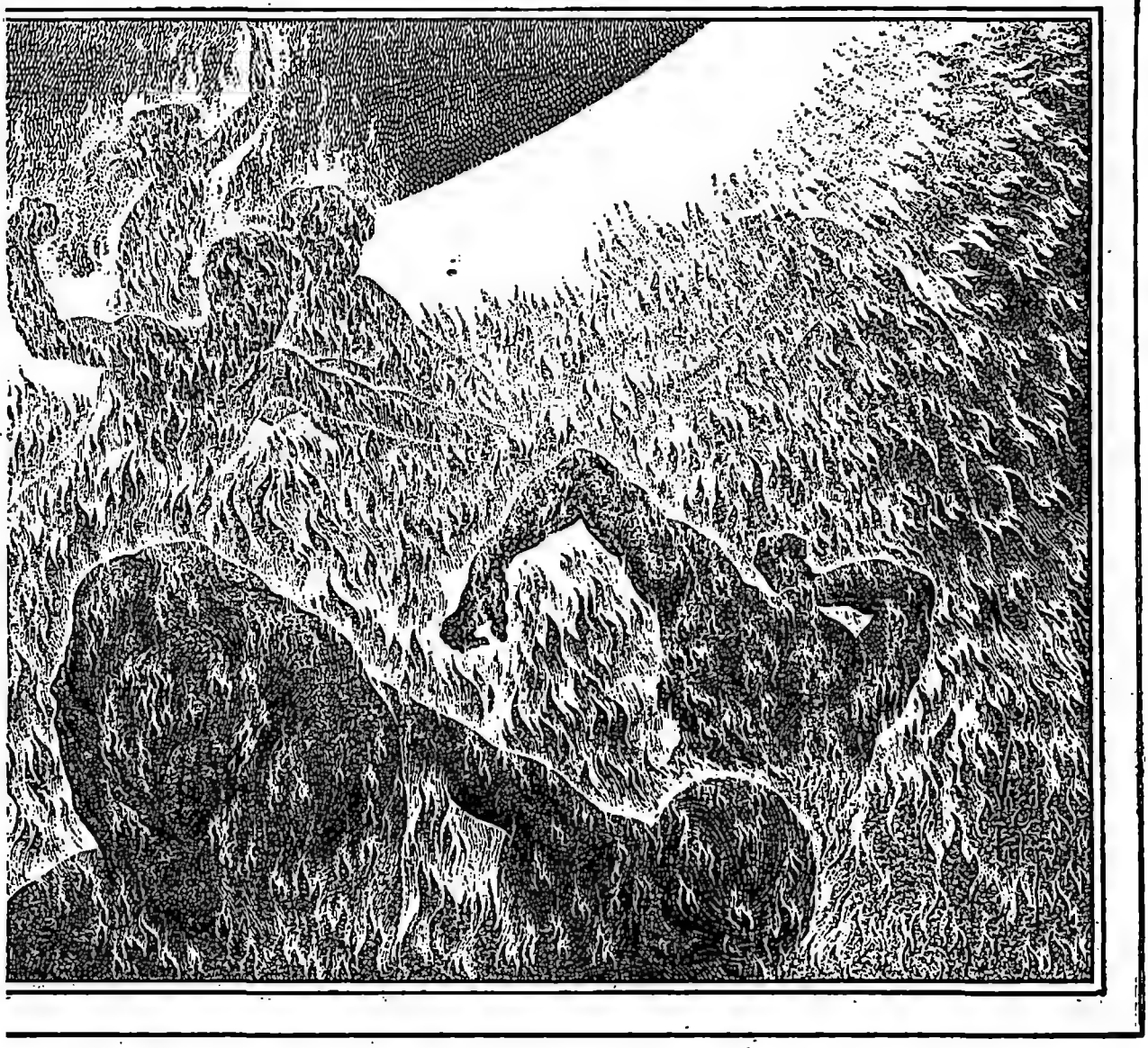


Heralded by a new star in the constellation of Andromeda it came—the blazing holocaust which hurled itself earthward, while mankind cowered, trembling, in whatever dark burrows they could find. . . .

denly awoke, switched on the electric light at the side of his bed, and, seeing that it was then ten minutes past twelve, sprang out, shuffled himself into his thickly padded dressing gown, and hurried up the winding stair which led to the observatory. One glance into the night showed him a perfectly clear sky. From the vast dome of heaven, wondrously blue, the stars shone out like points of fire. And Mequillen, with a sigh of satisfaction, began his work at the telescope, comparing the sky, field by field, with his star chart, on the chance of finding new variable stars.

After his usual fashion he was immediately absorbed, and, the sky remaining clear, he went on working, unconscious of time, until a deep-toned clock in the room beneath struck the hour of three. Then Mequillen started, and realized that he had been so absorbed that he had not noticed the striking of one or two. He leaned back from the telescope in a suddenly assumed attitude of relaxation, stretching his arms and casting up his eyes to the still clear vault above him.

The next instant he became rigid; the next he began to tremble with excitement; the

next he could have shouted for joy. For there, in the constellation which astronomers have named Andromeda, Mequillen detected a new star!

He knew as he gazed and gazed, intoxicated with the delight and wonder of his discovery, that the burning and glittering object at which he was looking had never shown its light to man before. There was no need to turn to his star charts. Mequillen, being a rich man, was always equipped with the latest information from all the great observatories of the world. That star, burning with such magnificence, was on no chart. Nay, he himself, only twenty-four hours previously, had taken a photograph of that particular field in the heavens wherein were stars to the twelfth magnitude; but the star at which he gazed was not among them. It had suddenly blazed up, and as he watched he saw it visibly increase in brightness and magnitude.

"A new star!" he murmured mechanically. "A new star! I wonder who else has seen it!"

Mequillen continued to watch until, as the February dawn drew near, the clouds spread great curtains between him and the heavens, and sky and stars were blotted out. Then he went to his bed, and in spite of his excitement slept soundly until ten o'clock in the morning.

WHEN Mequillen woke and looked out across the Surrey hills and vales, the entire landscape was being rapidly blotted out by a curious mist, or fog, which seemed to come from nowhere. A vast, mighty blanket of yellow seemed to be dropped between him and everything as he looked. At one moment he saw the summit of a hill many miles away; the next he could not even see his own garden beneath his windows. And when he went downstairs half an hour later the fog had become of the color of gray ash. The house was full of it, and the electric light was turned on everywhere and to little effect.

Mequillen's sister, Adela, who kept house for him—with the assistance of a housekeeper and several female servants—came to him in his study, looking scared.

"Dan," she said, "isn't there something queer about this fog? It's—it's getting worse."

Mequillen laid down a bundle of letters which he had just taken up, and walked out to the front door and into the garden. He looked all around him, and sniffed.

"H-m! It certainly does seem queer, Addie," he answered. "We've never had a fog like this in these parts since we knew them."

The girl sniffed, too.

"Dan," she said, "it's as if it were the very finest dust. And—look there!"

She had been wiping her hand with a tiny wisp of handkerchief as she spoke, and now she held it out to Mequillen.

"Look!" she repeated.

Mequillen looked down and saw a curious stain—a species of smudge or smear of a faint gray color. Without making any remark, he ran the tip of his finger along the nearest object, a trellis.

The same smudge or smear appeared on his finger.

"It's on everything," whispered the girl. "See—it's on my cheek! It is some sort of dust, Dan. What's the matter?"

But Mequillen made no answer. He asked for breakfast, and they went in together. By that time the interior of the house was as full of the fog as the exterior was hidden by it, and everything that they touched—plate, china, linen—gave off the gray smear. By noon everything was wrapped in an ashen gray atmosphere, and the electric lights had no power beyond a very limited compass.

"This is vexatious," said Mequillen. "I was going to have the motor out and take you across to Greenwich. I wanted to make an inquiry at the observatory. Do you know, Addie, I found a new star last night!"

"A new star!" she exclaimed. "But you won't go, Dan?"

"Won't go?" he said, laughing. "I should like to see anybody go anywhere in this, though it may be only local. By George! Weren't the Cockerlyne family coming out to dine and sleep tonight?"

Addie nodded.

"Well, I hope they won't run into this," continued Mequillen. "I'll ring up Dick Cockerlyne and ask him what the weather's like in town. And then I'll ring up the observatory."

He went off to the small room in which the telephone was placed. His sister followed him, and as they passed close beneath the cluster of lights in the hall Mequillen saw that the girl's face was drawn and pallid.

He stopped sharply. "Why, Addie!" he said. "Frightened?"

She laid her hand on his arm, and he felt it trembling.

"Dan," she whispered, "I'm—I'm horribly afraid. What—what is this? You know, there's never been anything like it before—in our time. What's happened?"

Mequillen laughed, and patted the hand that lay on his arm.

"Come, come, Addie!" he said soothingly. "This isn't like you. I think this fog is uncommon, and I can't account for it, but I've no doubt it can be accounted for. Now, let's ring up Cockerlyne. I've a notion we shall hear they've got a bright morning in London."

The girl shook her head and acted as if she would follow him to the telephone, then suddenly turned away. In the silence, a woman's shrill scream rang out.

"That's cook—in hysterics," said Addie. "I shall have to be brave for the sake of the servants, Dan. They're all as frightened as—as I am."

Nearly an hour later, Mequillen came out of the little room and called his sister into the study.

He closed the door, and beckoned her into the arc of the electric light.

"This is queer!" he said in a whisper. "I've been talking to Cockerlyne and to the observatory. Dick says this fog struck London at ten o'clock. It's there just as it is here, and everything is at a standstill. Dick hasn't the remotest notion how he's going to get away from the city. But that is nothing. Addie, it's all over Europe."

The girl made a little inarticulate sound of horror in her throat, and her face whitened.

"All over Europe, so they say at Greenwich," continued Mequillen. "From Lisbon to Moscow, and from Inverness to Constantinople! Land and sea—it's everywhere. It—well, it's something unexplainable. Such a thing has never been known before. But it's no use getting frightened, Addie; you must be brave. It's no doubt some natural phenomenon that will be accounted for. And—phew, how very hot this room is!"

The girl went close to her brother, and laid her hand on his arm.

"Dan," she said, "it isn't the room. See, the fire's very low, and the ventilating fan's working. It's the same everywhere. Come into the garden." She led the way out into the murk.

MEQUILLEN followed her out of the house, knitting his brows and snapping his fingers, as he always did when he was puzzled. For several days the weather had been unusually cold for the time of year. Released now from the preoccupation of the last few hours, he suddenly realized that the day was as hot as July should be under normal conditions. He turned to an outdoor thermometer.

"Why—why," he exclaimed, "it's over seventy now! Seventy in February! Addie, something's happened to this old world of ours. Look there!"

As they watched, the mercury rose one, two, three degrees. The brother and sister stared at each other. And Mequillen suddenly dropped his hands with a gesture of helplessness.

"Well," he said, "there's nothing to be done but to wait. I—I don't understand it."

They went back into the house together, and into Mequillen's study, only to stand and stare at each other in silence. Then Addie made a sudden effort at conversation.

"Tell me about the new star, Dan," she said.

Mequillen started.

"The new star!" he exclaimed. "The new star! My God, I wonder if that has anything to do with this? It—"

The parlormaid, white and scared, came noiselessly into the circle of electric light within which the brother and sister were standing.

"You are wanted at the telephone, sir," she said.

In a few minutes Mequillen came back, shaking his head.

"That was the observatory," he said quietly. "This fog, or whatever it is, is all over the world—over South Africa, North and South America, India, Australia, anyway. And the heat's increasing."

"And—the reason?" whispered Addie.

Mequillen sat down and dropped his head in his hands.

"There's no man can tell the reason," he answered. "He can't even make a guess at it. Something's happened, that's all. We must wait—wait."

And he took up the letters which had remained unopened on his desk, began to sort them out and to read them.

"Let us go on with our ordinary routine," he said. "That will be best."

The girl left the room, jangling a bunch of keys. But within half an hour she was back, accompanied by the housekeeper.

"Dan," she said quietly, "the servants want to go. They think the end of the world's come, and they want to get to their own homes."

"How do they propose to reach them?" asked Mequillen. "They can't see a yard before them."

"I told them that, Mr. Mequillen," said the housekeeper, "but it was of no use. You see, sir, they all live pretty close to here, and they say they can find their way blindfold. They'd better go, sir, or we shall have more hysterics."

"Give me some money for them, Dan," said Addie.

Mequillen rose, and, unlocking a drawer, handed a cash box to his sister.

"I don't see what good money can do them if the world's coming to an end," he said with a laugh. "Well, let them do what they like."

When the two women had left him, Mequillen went outside again and looked at the thermometer hanging on the wall.

"Great Heavens!" he exclaimed. "Eighty already! What can it mean?"

And then, standing there in the strange all-wrapping fog in his quiet garden on the slope of the peaceful Surrey hills, Mequillen's thoughts turned to the great city lying only a few miles away. What was happening in London? He saw, with small exercise of imagination, the congested traffic, the discomfort, the inconvenience, the upsetting of all arrangements and order in an ordinary fog. What, then, must be the effect of this extraordinary one? For Mequillen was sufficiently versed in science to know that the world had never—never, at any rate, since historical records of it began—known such a day as this. And supposing it lasted, supposing—

But then he interrupted his train of thought to glance once more at the thermometer.

"Yes, yes!" he muttered to himself. "Yes, but supposing the heat goes on increasing, increasing as it's increased during the last few hours? My God, it's awful to contemplate!"

The house was very quiet when the frightened servants had left it. Mequillen and his sister made some effort to eat the lunch which the housekeeper prepared; but the attempt was a farce, and presently they found themselves pacing up and down, from room to room, from house to garden, waiting for they knew not what.

There was no change in the atmosphere, so far as the fog was concerned, but the thermometer rose steadily, until at six o'clock at night it reached ninety, and they were feeling as if they must soon gasp for breath. Unknown to Addie, Mequillen went to the telephone, and eventually got into communication with Dick Cockerlyne, who was still at his city office.

"Dick," he said, as steadily as he could, "are you still there?"

"I am," came back the answer in tones that Mequillen could scarcely recognize.

"How is it with you?"

One word came along. Mequillen felt it to be the only word that could come.

"Hell!"

Mequillen shivered, and again spoke.

"Dick, what is happening? What—"

But then he was sharply rung off. From that moment he had no further communication with the outer world. Once—twice—three times he tried the telephone again before midnight; no response was given. And all around the house a silence reigned which was like the silence of a deserted ocean. Nothing but the fog was there—not a voice, even of fear or terror, came up from the valley. And the heat went on steadily increasing.

There was no sleep for Mequillen or his sister or the housekeeper that night. They had all changed into the lightest summer garments they could find, but by the middle of the night the two women were lying prostrate with exhaustion, and the thermometer was a long way over one hundred degrees. Mequillen did all that knowledge could suggest to him to obtain relief and coolness for them; but there was no air—the atmosphere was still, lifeless, leaden. And when the morning came the all-enveloping fog was still there, and the heat was still increasing.

How they got through that second day Mequillen never knew. He had visions of what might be going on in places where the water supply was bad. He, fortunately, was in command of a splendid and probably inexhaustible supply; he had, too, a well-stocked larder and a well-provided cellar of good wine. Only just able to crawl about, he looked after the two women—the housekeeper, a woman of full habit, was more than once on the verge of collapse; Addie's wiriness and excellent physique kept her going. But as it grew to the second midnight they were all gasping for breath, and Mequillen, making brave efforts to keep the women alive, knew that before many hours were over all would be over with them. And then, as he lay stretched out in a lounging chair, anxiously watching his sister, who lay on a sofa close by, the door was pushed open, and Dick Cockerlyne, reeling like a drunken man, staggered in, and dropped headlong at Mequillen's side.

MEQUILLEN summoned up what strength remained in him, and set himself with clenched teeth and fierce resolution to bring his friend round. Cockerlyne was a big man, a fellow of brawn and muscle, who in ordinary times would have thought nothing of walking fifty miles on end, if need arose; now, looking at his great limbs, scarcely hidden by the thin silk shirt and flannel trousers which clothed them, Mequillen saw that he was wasted as if he had undergone starvation. His face had aged by ten years, and there was a look of horror in its lines and in his half open eyes which told of human fear and terror. And once more Mequillen wondered what was going on in the congested city of London.

As he poured a weak mixture of brandy and seltzer down the unconscious man's throat, Mequillen glanced at his sister. She had paid no attention whatever to Cockerlyne's entrance, but lay motionless, her hands clasped across her chest, slowly and regularly gasping for breath. But Mequillen knew what would rouse her, for she and Cockerlyne had been

engaged for the past six months, and were about to be married and one great source of her anxiety during the past two days had been her fears for his safety. And as he saw Cockerlyne reviving, he returned to her.

"Addie!" he whispered. "Here is Dick!"

The girl slowly opened her eyes and turned her head, and a faint flush came into her white cheeks. Mequillen reached across and handed her a glass out of which he had been giving her liquid food at intervals during the past hour.

"Drink that, and then get up and help me with him," he said.

Cockerlyne opened his eyes to the full at last, and as he saw the brother and sister struggled up from the floor.

"I got through, anyway," he said. "I thought that if we—are all going to—to die—I'd see Addie first. I—have I been in a faint, Dan?"

"Lie down again, Addie, this instant!" commanded Mequillen sharply. "Now, then, Dick, drink the rest of that brandy and seltzer, and then you shall have some of this concentrated meat extract. No hysteria, now. What we've all got to do is to keep up strength till this passes. I'm off to our housekeeper. I forbid you two to move or to speak until I come back."

When he returned Mequillen found his sister staring at Cockerlyne, and Cockerlyne staring at her, as if they were looking their last at each other.

"Come, come!" he cried, with the best imitation of a laugh that he could raise. "We're not at that stage yet. Now, then, obey your doctor."

With that he fed them both as if they were children, and presently had the gratification of seeing the color come back to Cockerlyne's face, and a new light into his eyes. The big man suddenly rose, shook himself and smiled grimly. There were sandwiches on the table, and he reached over and took one in each hand, and began to eat voraciously.

"Chuck the nursing, Dan," he growled. "I'm all right. I said I'd get it done, and I've done it. I'm here!"

Mequillen saw with thankfulness that Cockerlyne was going to be dependable. He nodded with assumed coolness.

"All right, old fellow," he said. "And—how did you get here?"

Cockerlyne moistened his tongue.

"Fought through it," he said grimly. "I've been thirty hours at it,—thirty hours!"

"Yes?" said Mequillen.

"You know," continued Cockerlyne, "when you telephoned to me at six last night? After that, I think I went mad for a while. Then I got out of the office, and somehow got to the Bank station of the South London—the tube trains ran now and then. I don't know how I did it, but I traveled that way as far as the train ran—Clapham, or somewhere. And then—well, I just made along this way. Of course, I knew every bit of the road. It was like sleepwalking."

Mequillen nodded, and picking up a fan, resumed his occupation of trying to agitate the air about his sister's face.

"Well, you're here, Dick," he said. "But—London?"

Cockerlyne shivered.

"London is—oh, I don't know what London is!" he answered. "I think half the people are dead, and the other half mad. Once or twice I went out into the streets. One man you met was on his knees, praying aloud; the next was—oh, I don't know! It seemed that hell was let loose; and yet the churches were crammed to the doors. And people were fighting for the liquor in the dram shops and the public houses. I—I don't seem to remember much; perhaps I'm mad myself now. How long will it be, Dan?"

"How long will what be?" asked Mequillen.

"The—the end? I expect this is the end, isn't it?" said Cockerlyne. "What else can it be?"

"Don't talk rot!" retorted Mequillen sharply. "I thought you'd come round again. Here, pour some of the stuff out of that bottle into that glass, and carry it to the housekeeper in the next room. Pull yourself together, man!"

"Sorry," said Cockerlyne, and he rose to carry out Mequillen's commands. "I—I'm light-headed, perhaps. Don't ask me any more about what I saw."

He went away to the housekeeper, and Mequillen heard him speaking to her in the dry, croaking tones in which they all talked. And presently Cockerlyne came hurriedly back, and standing at the open door, beckoned to him with a shaking hand. Mequillen rose, and shambled across to him, looking an interrogation.

"Come out to the garden!" whispered Cockerlyne, and he led the way to the front door. "Listen!" he said. "I caught the sound in there! Listen!"

Mequillen grasped one of the pillars of the porch and strained his ears. And somewhere, so far off that it might have been thousands of miles away, he heard what he knew to be the coming of a mighty wind, and instinctively he tightened his grip on the pillar.

"It's a cyclone coming, Cockerlyne!" he shouted, though all around them was still and quiet. "It'll sweep all before it—house, everything! Quick—the two women!"

But before either man could turn to the

open door the great fog was swept away before their eyes as if it had literally been snatched from them by some gigantic hand from heaven, and where it had been was a burning and dazzling light of such power that in an instant they were groveling on the ground before it with their eyes pressed instinctively into the crooks of their quivering elbows.

OF THE two men, Mequillen was the first to comprehend what had happened; and with his comprehension came coolness and resource. Never had he thought so quickly in his life.

"Dick," he whispered, "keep your eyes shut tightly, and turn and creep back into the hall. I'm doing the same thing. You know the little room on the left? Don't open your eyes until you get in there. Now, then," he continued, with a gasp, as they reached the room and stood upright, "you can open them here, for the shutters are up. Ah! And yet, you see, although this room should be quite dark, it's almost as light as a normal winter morning."

Cockerlyne stared stupidly about him.

"For God's sake, Dan, what's happened?" he explained.

Mequillen was fumbling in a drawer. He brought out two silk mufflers and passed one to his friend.

"I have a very good idea as to what's happened," he answered gravely. "I'll tell you in a few minutes. But first muffle your eyes—there, you'll see through two thicknesses of the silk. Now for the women. Fortunately the curtains are closely drawn in both rooms, or I should have feared for their eyesight in that sudden rush of light—light, Dick, such as this globe has never seen before! Dick, we've got to blindfold them, and then get them into the darkest room in this house. There's an underground room—not a cellar—which I've sometimes used for experiments. We must get them downstairs."

It was easy to see, in spite of the mufflers, that the light in the hall was blinding, and in the curtained study as bright as on an open sea on a cloudless day in summer. And Addie was lying on her sofa with her arms crossed over her forehead and eyes, obviously distressed by the sudden glare.

"Don't move your arms!" exclaimed Mequillen sharply. "Keep your eyes shut as tight as you can."

"What is it?" she asked. "Has the fog gone, and the sun come?"

"The fog has gone, and a sun has come," replied Mequillen. "And its light is unbearable—just yet. Now, Addie, I am going to blindfold you and take you and Mrs. Jepson down to the underground room. We shall all have to get used to the light by degrees. Do just what I tell you, and Dick and I will make you comfortable."

But when the two women were safely disposed of in a room into which scarcely any light ever penetrated, but which was then as light as noontide, Mequillen drew Cockerlyne into the study, and groping his way to the windows, closed the shutters and drew the curtains over them.

"Now you can take off your muffler," he said quietly. "There, you see it's light enough, even now, to read print and to see the time. And—you see the time? Half past twelve, midnight!"

Cockerlyne's face blanched. He swallowed, and straightened himself.

"What is this, Mequillen?" he asked quietly. "Do you *know?*"

Mequillen shook his head.

"Not with certainty," he answered. "But I think I know. Forty-eight hours ago I discovered a new star, which increased in magnitude at a surprising rate even while I watched it. Now I think it is a new sun."

"A—new—sun!" exclaimed Cockerlyne. "Impossible!"

"Call it what you will," said Mequillen. "It is, I am certain, at any rate, a vast heavenly body of fire, which was traveling toward this part of space at an inconceivable rate when I first saw it, and is probably at this moment nearer to us than our sun is. Do you feel that the heat is increasing?"

"Yes," replied Cockerlyne; "but it is different in character."

"It is difficult in character because the wrapping of infinitely fine dust which has been around us has been drawn away," said Mequillen. "But it will increase in intensity."

Cockerlyne gripped the table.

"And?" he whispered.

"In an hour or two we shall be shriveled up, consumed, like shreds of wool thrown into a furnace!" answered Mequillen.

Cockerlyne straightened himself.

"All right, Dan," he said quietly. "I'm glad I came here. What's to be done now?"

Mequillen had turned to a nest of drawers in one of the recesses of his study. He got out some spectacles fitted with lenses of very dark glass, and handed one to Cockerlyne.

"We will make an attempt to see this new sun," he said. "Put these spectacles on, and for the present fold that muffler about your eyes again once. You'll see through both muffler and spectacles. And now come up to the observatory."

Arrived there, Cockerlyne understood little

or nothing of the preparations which Mequillen made. Conscious only of the terrible heat, he stood waiting and thinking of the fate which was about to befall them; and suddenly a terrible impatience seized him. If there was but an hour or so to live, his place was with the woman he loved.

"Look here, Dan!" he exclaimed. "I'm going down! If the end's coming, then—"

But Mequillen laid a hand on his arm and drew him forward, at the same time removing the muffler from his head.

"We will go down soon, Cockerlyne," he said. "We must, for we shall have to tell them. But first—see! You can look with safety now."

And then Cockerlyne, following his friend's instructions, looked and saw widespread above him the dome of the heavens. But never had he so seen it in all his life. From north to south, from east to west, it glowed with the effulgence of shining brass; and in the northeast hung a great globe of fiery red, vaster in dimension than the sun which the world had known till then, and, even when seen through the protections which Mequillen had prepared, corruscating and glittering with darting and leaping flame.

"My God!" muttered Cockerlyne, in a hushed voice. "Dan, is that—It?"

"That is It," answered Mequillen quietly. "It is nearly twice the magnitude of our sun, and it is coming nearer. This is no time to make calculations, or even speculations; but I believe it is, at any rate, as near to us as our sun is. Come away, Cockerlyne; I want to look out on the world. Hold my hand and follow me."

And he dragged Cockerlyne away through a trapdoor and into a dark passage, and then into a darker room.

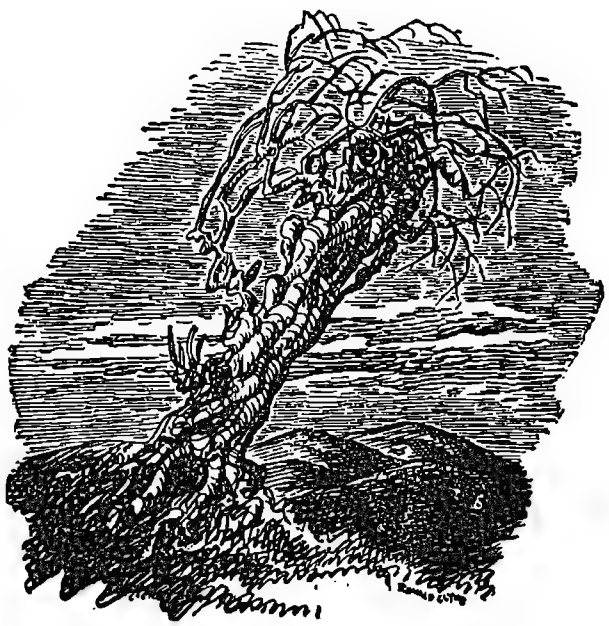
"Keep your hands over your spectacles for a while, and get acustomed to the light by degrees," he cautioned. "I am going to open an observation shutter here, through which we can see a vast stretch of country to the north. It will be a surprise to me if much of it is not already in flames. Now, if you are ready."

Cockerlyne covered his eyes as he heard the click of the shutter. Even then, and through the thick black glasses which he was wearing, he felt the extraordinary glare of the light which entered.

Presently Mequillen touched his arm.

"You can look now," he said. "See—it's just as I thought! The land's on fire!"

COCKERLYNE looked out upon the great sweep of hill and valley, wood and common, which stretched across the fairest part of Surrey from the heights above the Shere and Albury to those beyond Reigate. He saw the little villages, with their spires and towers and red roofs and tall gray gables; he saw the isolated farms, the stretches of wood, the hillside coppices, the patches of heath, and the expanses of green which indicated land untouched by spade or plow.



It was a scene with which he had been familiar from boyhood. Of late he had explored every nook and corner of it with Addie Mequillen, and at all times of the year it had seemed beautiful to him. But under the glare and brilliance of this extraordinary light everything seemed changed. All over that vast prospect great pillars of smoke and flame were rising to the sky. From the valley beneath them came the shrieks and cries of men and women, and as the two men watched they saw the evergreens in Mequillen's garden suddenly turn to the whiteness of paper, shrivel up, and disappear in fine ashes.

"Look there!" whispered Mequillen, pointing a shaking finger. "There—Dorking's on fire! And Reigate, too!"

Cockerlyne tried to speak, but his tongue rattled in his mouth like a dry pea in a drier pod. He touched Mequillen's arm, pointed downward, and Mequillen nodded.

"Yes," he said. "We had better go down."

He took Cockerlyne by the hand and led him back to the observatory, which, in spite of the fact that all its shutters were drawn, was full of light. And as they stepped into it a spark of white flame suddenly appeared in the woodwork and ran like lightning round the rim of the dome.

"On fire," said Mequillen quietly. "It's no

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good, Cockerlyne; we can't do anything. The end's come! We—oh, my God, what's this? What *is* this? Cockerlyne—Cockerlyne, where *are* you?"

For just as they had seen the grayness of the great fog snatched away from the earth, so now they saw the extraordinary light which had succeeded it snatched away. It was gone in the flash of an eye, with the speed of lightning, and as it went they felt the earth move and shudder, and all around them fell a blackness such as they had never known. And as the two men gripped each other in their terror there suddenly burst upon the dome of the observatory a storm of what seemed to be bullets—fierce, insistent, incessant. The serpentlike trail of fire in the woodwork quivered once and died out. And Mequillen, trembling in every limb, released his hold on Cockerlyne and staggered against the nearest wall.

"Rain!" he said. "Rain!"

In the darkness Mequillen heard Cockerlyne first stumble about and then fall heavily. Then he knew that the other man had fainted, and he made his way to a switch, turned on the electric light, and got water to bring him round. But when he did so Cockerlyne for some minutes croaked and gabbled incessantly, and it was not until Mequillen had hurried down to the dining room for brandy for him that he regained his senses and was able to sit up, gasping and staring about him. He pointed a shaking finger to the aperture in the dome, through which the rain was pouring, unheeded by Mequillen, in a ceaseless cascade.

"Where is—It?" he gasped. "What—what's come of It?"

Mequillen shook him to his feet.

"Pull yourself together, Cockerlyne!" he said. "This is no time to talk science; this is a time to act. Come down, man; we must see to the women! We've just escaped from fire; now we're likely to meet our deaths by water. Listen to that rain! Here, help me to close that shutter. Now, downstairs! It's lucky we're on a hillside, Cockerlyne! But the people in the valleys! Come on!"

And, leaving Cockerlyn to follow him, Mequillen ran down through the house, to find his sister and the housekeeper in the hall. As he saw them, he knew that they had realized what he now had time to comprehend—that the terrible heat was dying away, and that it was becoming easier and easier to breathe. As he passed it, he glanced at a thermometer, and saw the mercury falling in a swift descent.

Mequillen caught his sister in his arms and

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 104)

pressed her to him. She looked anxiously into his face.

"Dick?" she said.

"He's safe—he's coming," Mequillen said.

Addie suddenly collapsed and hid her face in her hands. The housekeeper was already in a heap in the nearest chair, sobbing and moaning. And as Cockerlyne came slowly down the stairs, Mequillen saw that, strong man as he was, his nerves had been shaken so much that he was trembling like a leaf.

Once more Mequillen had to summon all his energies together in the task of bringing his companions around, and as he moved about from one to the other his quick ear heard the never ceasing rattle of the rain, which was heavier than any tropical rain that ever fell.

And presently he caught the sound of newly forming cascades and waterfalls, cutting new ways from the hilltops to the level lands of the valleys. Now the normal coolness of middle winter was coming back. The women picked up the wraps they had thrown aside, the men hurried into greatcoats. And as the February dawn came, gray and slow, across the hills, Mequillen and Cockerlyne went up to the observatory again and into the little lookout turret from which they had seen the spirals of smoke and flame rising from the land only a few hours before.

The rain was still falling, but with no more violence than that of a tropical storm.

But the air was throbbing, pulsating, humming with the noise of falling waters. A hundred yards away from the house a churning and seething mass of yellow foam was tearing a path, wide and deep, through a copse of young pine; down in the valley immediately beneath them lay a newly formed lake. In the valleys on every side, as far as the eye could reach, lay patches of silvery hue, which they knew to be great sheets of water; and now the air was cool, and the hitherto tortured lungs could breathe it in comfort.

"Mequillen," said Cockerlyne, after a long silence, "what happened?"

"I am as a child standing at the edge of a great ocean," he answered. "I cannot say definitely. I think that the great star which we saw, rushing upon us, was suddenly arrested, split into fragments, when that darkness fell, and that we were saved. Once more, Cockerlyne, the old world, a speck in space, will move on. For look there!"

And Cockerlyne turned as Mequillen pointed, and saw, slowly rising over the Surrey hills, the kindly, ordinary sized sun of a gray February morning. ■ ■ ■

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(Continued from page 95)

"Finished?" he asked softly.

Maine nodded and shivered. "Three hundred of them, sealed up in a living mausoleum," he said dully. "God alone knows what's happening in there. There were over a hundred great globes of rabies in there, and I smashed them all. They'll be clawing the vitals out of each other before the morning dawns."

"And Vorst?"

"I shot him."

"You—you damned fool!" Castle stared at him aghast.

"Am I? Now think it out."

Castle blinked but failed to get the drift of it. He didn't realize that Kellard Maine had found a huge gaping hole in the criminal law—and had dived clean through it.

Maine smiled bitterly, there in the darkness.

"Take it that I've confessed to you," he said. "You arrest me. You take me to the station. You charge me with suspected murder on my own confession. In the morning you haul me up before the magistrate. What for? For having murdered the man I killed fifteen years ago—and for whose death I've already served sentence? Think it out, old man. I'm still a free man."

Castle did not answer for a long while. The cold, indubitable fact had got him by the throat.

"Good Lord!" he breathed at last.

Maine shook himself as though to rid his brain of unpleasant thoughts.

"Things work out all right up at your end?" he asked.

"It was a clean-up!" Jack Castle, with his mind back on the wild events of the midnight hours, was emphatic about it. "A hundred per cent clean-up. The Crossley tender made three trips to headquarters, loaded to the gunn'les every time. What with the crowd you've walled up down there, and the crowd Scotland Yard raked in, I shouldn't think there's much left of them anywhere in London. They got Lewis, though," he added speculatively.

"What?" Maine snapped the word at him.

"Vorst himself got him. Stuck a triangular knife-edge on the top of a wall; Lewis jumped in the darkness, couldn't see the razor blades, jabbed his hand on them—and they got him!"

"Not—not dead?"

"Pretty far gone when I left. They couldn't get hold of Hollis. Phoned him for twenty minutes solid—and then sent the Flying Squad van for him. Found the old boy all in, lying

out on the flat of his back, dead to the world. Been overdoing it. Four hours' sleep in four whole days, too much for the old boy. He couldn't stick it. But they managed to get a bit of life into him.

"He clawed himself up to his laboratory—he had flopped out with his boots on—measured out enough heroin to kill half an army corps, and pumped it into his forearm and then cursed and blazed at the driver all the way down for slowing down to thirty at the corners. He got there on time, and has been working at him like a galley slave ever since. Whether he can—"

"Quick, and speed her up, man!" cried Maine. "Give her all she's got!"

He pulled out the sheaves of papers from his coat pocket, switched on his torch and began feverishly hunting for the set marked *Antidotes.*

By the time the boat touched Millwall Stairs he found what he wanted. The big Crossley was waiting there, and together they rushed round to where Sir Everard Lewis lay, racked with agony, his right arm swelled to treble its normal size.

Maine thrust the paper into Hollis's shaking hands.

Lewis looked up, a twisted smile of recognition on his face.

"I—see you—beat 'em to it," he croaked.

Maine looked down at him.

"Hollis has got the antitoxin," he said quietly. "I think he can pull you through."

"Sure of it," answered Lewis, struggling to keep his twitching muscles still. "And the others?"

"I've got them all here. I'm sending them through to the Health Ministry tonight. There will be a whale of a story for the papers in the morning. The Ministry can get the antidotes through to the infected areas as soon as their chemists can mix up the dopes."

Lewis relaxed, breathing heavily. "Think that arm will have to come off, Hollis?" he asked.

"Hell's bells, sir—no!" said the old boy, and injected something into the cut that burned like red-hot fire.

Lewis looked up at Maine.

"You don't want to wait around here, my boy," he said. "Hollis can see to me—and you've an appointment with Miss Warden that has waited too long already."

Maine went out to where Sir Everard's car was waiting at the kerb.

"Drive me," he said to the chauffeur, "to the Cottage Hospital—Ewell. And go like the devil."

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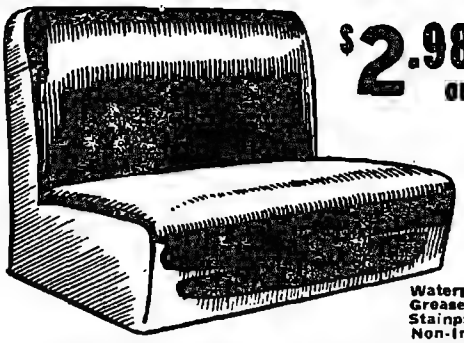

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FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

(Continued from page 14)

bounds, and how far from the truth is imagination? The fantastic dreams of Jules Verne came to life in his portrayal of the submarine. The atom bomb was visualized in print long before it preyed upon the world. The conquest of the moon is being discussed even more widely and practically. In short, where are the bounds that restrict mankind's imaginations, hopes, and desires? There are none, and the fantasy writer may embark upon a limitless excursion into the furthest future, and who knows how far he may be from the truth?

We read him, we escape with him into enchantment. We meet people who become very real to us. We stand upon the moon ourselves and stare upwards into a galaxy of a billion streaming stars, or we stand upon a sand dune with the desert wind beating our faces and look upon the aged face of the sphinx and wonder at the magic of the ages. We climb a towering, ice-covered peak and look upon a secret valley hidden away from mankind, or we plunge into the very depths of the hidden seas and gaze with awe upon the mysteries hidden there. We embark on time journeys into the past, the middle ages, the furthest future, and who can say that what we see and believe is false? Each dreams his own special dream. Yes, Editor, fantasy to me and thousands of others is the magic key unlocking the door of the far-away frontiers of the imagination.

JOHN F. SEGESMAN, JR.
Box 80,
Anchorage, Alaska.

CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations on keeping up the fine work! "The Gray Mahatma" is a Talbot Mundy story I've never read—and I've read dozens!

In fact I've got so many books around by such authors as Mundy, Haggard, Burroughs, Taine and others that I've taken up selling them as a hobby with my wife as unpaid steno.

Will be glad to offer any to other interested readers.

I don't think you'll ever surpass the phenomenal job you did of issuing Taine's "Purple Sapphire" some time ago. A superlative story, unknown to many.

Thanks for your help!

DICK MOHR.
Box 3003,
Beverly Hills, Calif.

DECEMBER ISSUE TOPS

It's been quite some time now since I wrote to you about F. F. M. Not that I haven't wanted to, what with the changes in format—back and forth—etc. I'm glad it's back to its old form now, without the sunburst.

This December issue is tops. I was especially glad to see Lovecraft back again. Sure would like to see some of his longer works in F.F.M. It's been long enough since the Arkam House editions to print them again.

THE READERS' VIEWPOINT

Still would like to see Haggard's "Wisdom's Daughter" and "Ayesha, The Return of She."

I have the following items for sale or trade—especially for trade if anyone can offer the March 1943 issue of F.F.M. for trade. The one featuring "The Ark of Fire." I need it to complete my file of F.F.M. I have all the other issues but that one. Anyone who can give information where I can get that one issue will be greatly appreciated. Also need a good copy of the November 1940—"The Snake Mother"—*Fantastic Novels*. I'll answer all letters.

Have a number of back issues available.

Now that I am settled down again I would like to hear from any fans living in this general area of the Inland Empire. I seldom see letters from them in your Viewpoint and wonder if there just aren't many around here. A self-addressed stamped envelope will bring you my list of mags and books.

GUY E. TERWILLEGER.

P.O. Box 387.
Nampa, Idaho.

WANTS COMPLETE F.F.M. FILE

It was quite by accident that I began to read F.F.M. But, I am not sorry, by any means.

I think that the untrimmed edges and inside illos and etc. make your book look a lot more *dignified* than in the May issue. Keep up the grand work, and you will have another, permanent fan.

Now to get to the point.

I am a completest, and as one, I want to get the older magazines first.

Could you please tell me if it is possible to buy every issue of F.F.M. from the first to the last?

And if it is possible, how much would it cost to buy them, either at newsstand or subscription price?

Thank you.

Also, I am interested in contacting some other completest, some people who have any old *Other Worlds; Imagination; Future; Science Fiction Quarterly;* and, any *Startling Stories.*

PAUL NOWELL.

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Editor's Note: Secondhand dealers or replies from other readers are your best 'bets for completing fantasy collections.

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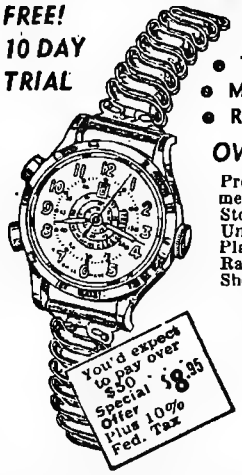

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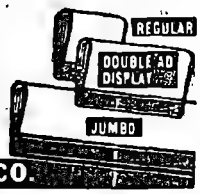

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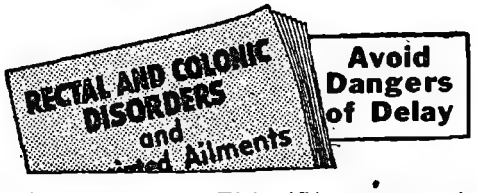

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IMPORTANT NOTICE

To pay off the creditors of the late Minndak Fantasy Society reprint editions of the three Finlay Portfolios have been made in limited editions. They are still available as are a very few copies of the Fanews Portfolio. The Finlay Portfolios each contain 8 beautiful illustrations by Virgil Finlay from the pages of F.F.M. and F.N. 24 beautiful drawings in all. Each in large size suitable for framing. The Fanews Portfolio contains 12 sheets of art work and photos of and by fans. Each sells for $1. We still have a few surprises left that we are sending out with each order for all 4.

WALTER DUNKELBERGER.

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A NICE DECEMBER COVER

Nice cover on the Dec. issue. Quite a relief after the three covers on your smaller format—which were not so good. Even Lawrence couldn't do much with that small size—but on the present large format he is excellent.

"The Gray Mahatma" was probably the best novel you have published since "The Woman Who Couldn't Die." Though a little vague in certain sections, it held the reader's interest all the way.

From what I've read of Mundy, his "Cleopatra" struck me as being the most enjoyable. If at all possible, why not publish it? Any of his other work would be appreciated too.

The inside illustrations, which are always superb, were outstanding this time. Particularly Finlay's double page spread on pages 12-13. Of course the one he penned on page 41 wasn't bad either. Fawcett's illo on page 97 showed marked similarity to Bok's work. Although, without a doubt you have the best illustrators in the field, a little variety wouldn't hurt. Cartier, Sibley and Stone are very good.

Of the four other stories I liked Heinlein's piece the best. Lovecraft's effort was completely lost on me. No plot, nothing but words. But then maybe I am biased—I never did care for Lovecraft.

In the way of a few suggestions for future issues—anything by Haggard, Taine, or Rohmer, as well as England.

I still need quite a few F.F.M.s as well as the first four pre-war F.N.s—and lots of other issues of different magazines. If any of you are stamp collectors, I will trade my stamps for your magazines.

JAN ROMANOFF.

26601 So. Western,
Apt. 341,
Lomita, California.

CAN YOU SPARE AN F.F.M.?

This is my first letter to a magazine, and I can't put into words how much enjoyment your two

magazines have given me, especially since joining the Navy.

Your selection of stories have been excellent. Please keep up the good work, particularly works of H. R. Haggard, A. Merritt, Lovecraft, and Robert E. Howard.

Also, if anybody has any old copies of stories by Burroughs, Howard, Taine, Lovecraft, Haggard and Merritt, please write.

Being in the service, I am not too rich, and I'd appreciate it if anybody could spare a few old copies for a sailor who has sure missed the wonderful hours of reading pleasure your two magazines have given him.

JOHN F. LEAVY, S. A.

U. S. S. Device A.M. 220,
Fleet Post Office,
New York, N. Y.

LIKED "REBIRTH"

I have been reading your magazine for quite a few years now, and I think that it is steadily getting better.

Being a citizen of the North I am having quite a time geting enough stf. to read. Our supply of mags is small and as I am living three miles from town I miss out once in a while.

About the last half a dozen issues of F.F.M. seem to me to be tops. However, the best story to my knowledge is "Rebirth." It was really a masterpiece of literature in the science-fiction field. It made me imagine what the future would be like after the A and H bombs are history.

I would like to hear from anyone in Canada, preferably Alberta or Saskatchewan, who has any old F.F.M.s, F.N.s or A.M.F.s for sale. The reason for this is that they can ship the easiest. However, anybody in Canada who has science-fiction books or novels for sale, would they please drop me a line?

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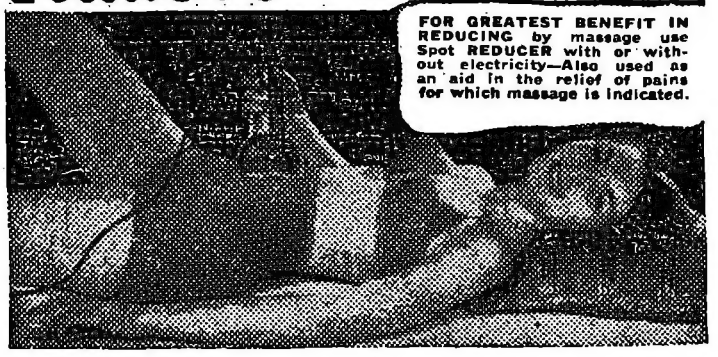

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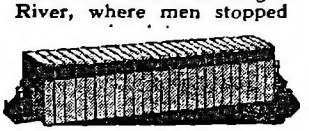

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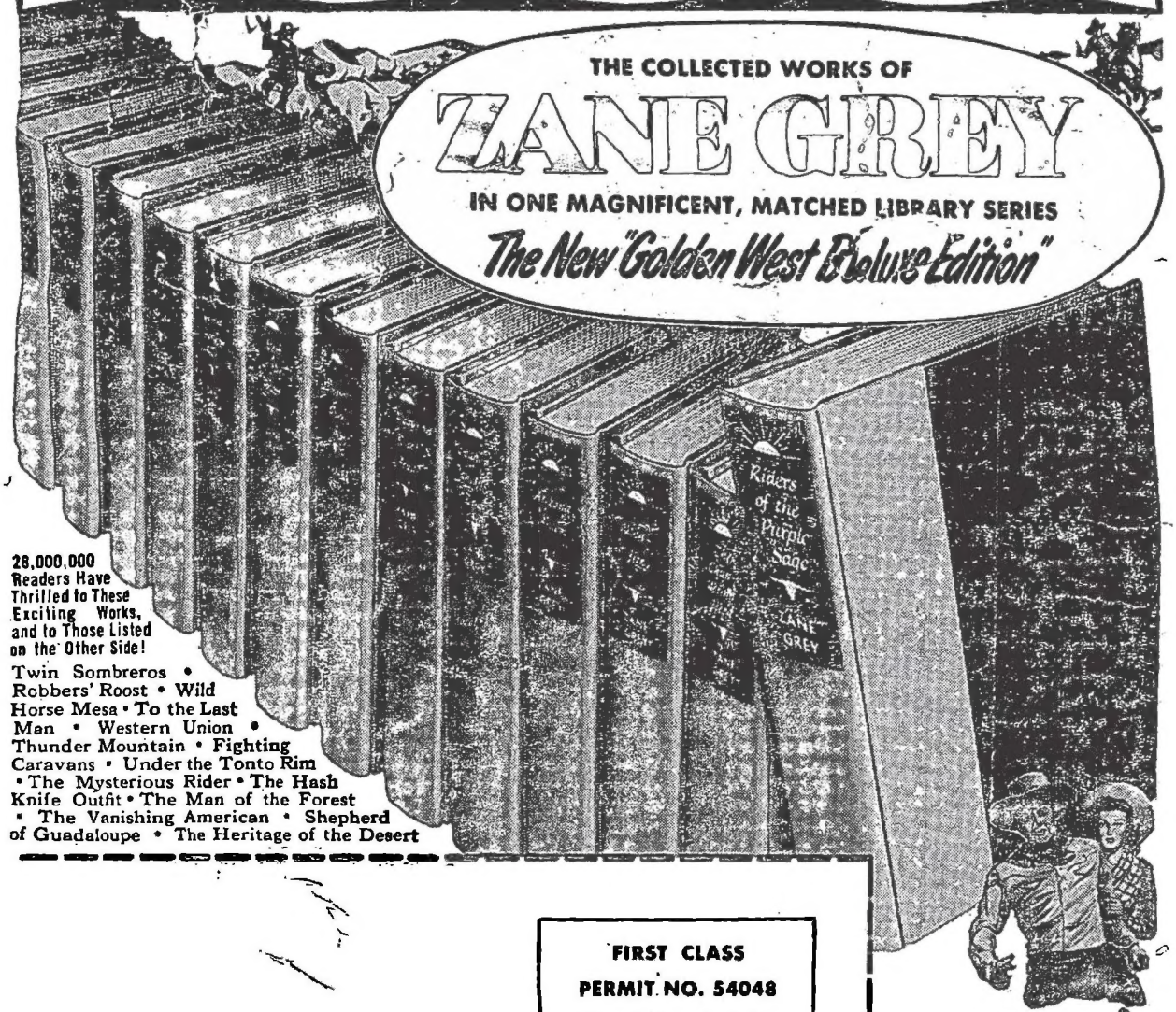

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